

## The Roaring Snake

**Summary:** The story is AU and starts with Harry's first visit to Diagon Alley. While it does follow the general outline of PS, it diverges from the canon considerably. This story features an attempt at credible Harry/Millicent. It will also feature a more pro-active Minerva who helps Harry within her limits, and a more intelligent, observant and socially active Harry, in place of the angsty and reclusive social-reject of the HP series. It will also feature attempts by many others, including Voldemort, and Lucius to manipulate Harry.

(Author's Note: It seems pretty unfair that the callous and unpleasant old coot, Dumbledore, gets monopoly rights over manipulating Harry. While I admit that the old man has had a head start and some nifty bonuses in that field, like full custody over Harry's person (be it covert or overt) and a submissive and apathetic staff at Hogwarts to help, it is rather a bitter testimony to the indifference of the whole 'Light' side that they all tolerate Dumbledore's tortures of poor Harry. In most of the fan-fictions I have read, it is usually the law which is on Harry's side and Dumbledore who is in violation of it. I am going to take the converse approach. Dumbledore is much too experienced and clever to leave legal loopholes for people to exploit. This is a story where the law (such as it is) is on Dumbledore's side, while it is Harry's friends who have to run rings round it to help poor Harry.

Warning to all Dumbledore, Snape and Malfoy lovers – just as in my other two stories, none of these characters will be particularly likeable – in fact, all three are fairly unpleasant.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

## Prologue

27th July 1991, Headmaster's office, Hogwarts

Dumbledore was seated in his chair, reading through a report, when a knock sounded on his door. "Enter", spoke the headmaster.

The door opened, ushering in the tall, stern figure of Minerva McGonagall. Dumbledore waved her into a seat before offering her a

lemon-drop, which the Transfiguration professor declined. “So, tell me Minerva, how have the muggle-borns responded this year?”, queried Dumbledore.

“Fairly well, Albus. Of the fourteen candidates to whom we sent invitations, nine have responded positively. We will have to take them to Diagon Alley soon. I think it is best if we split them into three groups of three each for the shopping trip.”

Dumbledore nodded, “Yes, that will be fine. How do you wish to handle it?”

“Well, Albus, I can take them on three separate days, but I will be fairly busy myself. I will take one bunch in the next few days. I'll ask Pomona or Aurora to take the other two batches to Diagon Alley.”

Dumbledore assented, “Yes, that will be perfect.” Minerva continued, “However, we have had no answer from Mr. Potter. Judging from the lack of response, I must wonder if he is even receiving his letter.”

Dumbledore looked pensive, “If we get no answer by the 30th, I will send someone to check on Harry on the 31st – it is his birthday, I believe.”

“I can check on Harry, if you tell me how to reach him”, returned McGonagall.

“No need, Minerva. I will send Hagrid if he does not reply.”

“Hagrid! Albus, are you serious?!”

“I would trust Hagrid with my life”, responded Dumbledore sternly.

“Albus, you cannot do that”, spluttered Minerva in disbelief. “Those muggles – they would be outraged and terrified if Hagrid were to appear on their doorstep. And I'm not sure what Harry knows about our world. If the lack of response from Harry is any indication, I really wonder if they have told Harry anything about us – or even his parents.”

“I’m sure it is not as bad as you depict it, Minerva”, replied Dumbledore soothingly, before continuing, “Leave Harry to me – I will make arrangements for Harry to get his supplies.”

“But, Albus”, began Minerva, a protest forming on her lips, when Dumbledore cut her off. “Trust me, Minerva, I have Harry’s best interests in mind.”

“Very well, Albus, in that case, I will be off to see to the muggle-borns this year.”

---(Scene Break)---

Minerva did not for a moment doubt that Dumbledore would make arrangements for Harry to arrive in Hogwarts. But she also had no doubts that Dumbledore intended to send Hagrid to collect Harry. And while Hagrid had his heart in the right place, he was not really qualified to tell Harry about the wizarding world. Minerva pursed her lips. She could not really deny that she was interested in Harry – like all the wizarding world, she had an interest in Harry Potter, but her interest went beyond the fact that he was the unwitting saviour of the said world. No, she had a more personal interest in him. Minerva sighed and drew her pensieve. Placing her wand to her temple, she drew a long silvery strand of memory – a memory of a conversation she had had with James Potter before he went into hiding – and placed it in her pensieve.

“You do not seem very sure about this course of action, James”, remarked McGonagall softly.

The tall and dark-haired James Potter sighed wearily, “No, Minerva – I’m not at all sure about it. Lily and Albus insist that the Fidelius charm is unbreakable and we’ll be safe, but I’m not convinced.”

“Comfort yourself, James. The Fidelius has never been broken.”

“It’s not just that, Minerva. It’s also the fact we’re going into hiding. It goes against everything we’ve been fighting for. To hide from Voldemort is to let him win.”

“Don't be ridiculous, James. It's folly not to recognise danger. And think of Harry – it is simply unfair to him to put him in danger.”

James Potter nodded, “That's the only reason why I'm even agreeing to this plan of Albus. Min – if something happens to Lily and me, just ensure that Harry is properly cared for.”

McGonagall had turned stern, “Stop it, James. Don't start turning all maudlin. You'll be fine and you and Lily will take care of Harry yourselves.”

James smiled tightly, “I hope so, Minerva. But one never knows. Merlin knows I've no wish to get myself killed.” Potter's looked earnestly and pleadingly at the older witch, “Just promise me you'll make sure Harry is happy if anything happens to us.”

Minerva answered quietly, “I'll do everything I can, James. Now let's stop getting all worked up over something that hopefully will never happen.” She put her hand on the younger man's shoulder, looking seriously into his eyes, as she continued quietly, “Keep safe, James. I'm sure we will all get through this nasty interlude.”

“Thanks, Min. You're right. I guess this stress is getting to me.”. The two sat quietly for a moment, and then James Potter rose, “Well, I'll be off, Min. I need to find Lily and see if she has finished talking to Dumbledore about that charm.”

McGonagall nodded, as she accompanied the younger man to the door, “Goodbye, James, and good luck”, she whispered as he left her office.

Prof. McGonagall emerged from the memory, and her eyes lacked their usual sternness. They were weary and sad. She had failed James Potter – she had promised him she would ensure Harry would be happy and well-cared for, but she had obeyed Albus and agreed to leave Harry with those horrid muggles. No matter what Dumbledore averred, Minerva was certain that those obnoxious muggles had never treated Harry properly, let alone concerning themselves about his happiness. She had met Petunia Dursley once and she was sure that the muggle woman hated magic. Judging from

the lack of response from Harry, Minerva was now worried exactly how little, if at all anything, the boy knew about the magical world. Harry may have been safe from Death Eaters with those muggles, but McGonagall was sure that he had not been happy. "I am truly sorry, James. I have failed you", murmured Minerva. "I doubt Harry has had a single happy moment in his life thus far, but I promise you, I'll make it up to him", declared Minerva to the world, hoping the spirit of James Potter would hear her.

Besides Harry's happiness or lack thereof, in the wizarding world, expectations for Harry Potter were sky high, and if he came in completely ignorant about all wizarding customs and practices ... No, that would never do. Minerva smiled – Albus had given her one bit of information inadvertently – the knowledge when Harry was coming to Diagon Alley – never imagining that Minerva would circumvent his direct instructions. If she could not go to where Harry was living, she could ascertain that she would be on hand when Harry came to the Diagon Alley. A plan slowly began to form in her mind. She wanted Harry to learn about the wizarding world in general, and Hogwarts in particular. What better way of informing him about Hogwarts than showing him the best specimens of all four Houses? She just needed to find people for all the four Houses who were not under the Headmaster's thumb.

Minerva walked to her table, opened a drawer and took out a file. The names of all the coming academic year's freshers was on the file. Minerva smiled – except in the case of muggle-borns, she knew most of the parents of the students that would be appearing in Hogwarts and had taught them herself, in many cases. Rapidly cycling through the list of names, she circled a few names apiece for students whose parents were in Ravenclaw, Slytherin and Hufflepuff – yes, this would work fine. There was no need to look for anyone in Gryffindor – Minerva herself served as a superb example of a Gryffindor. No matter what House the children ended up in at Hogwarts, the parents or guardians were the among the finest of their Houses. It was likely she could persuade at least one from each House to come to Diagon Alley on the 31st. McGonagall knew some of the kids personally, and they would make good friends for Harry. It would do the boy – and the muggle-borns Minerva was bringing along – a world of good if they were with kids who knew the magical world. Hopefully, Harry would

be able to make friends with some of them and these children, along with the muggle-borns whom Minerva was bringing along, would be good company for Harry. They could have lunch together in Diagon Alley and she would make sure Harry had a decent birthday for once.

Minerva had wondered for a moment if she should bring people from other Houses. She loved Harry dearly and wanted him in her House, but she wanted Harry there because he belonged there. She would put him in possession of information, and would let him make the choice. It was easy to prejudice him against the other houses, but all of Minerva's scruples rebelled against such a course of action. No – Harry would belong where he belonged and she would make sure he was happy wherever he was.

Minerva picked up her cloak, and wrapping it around herself, walked out of Hogwarts, and apparated to her Manor. She had to contact a few people.

---(Scene Break)---

Dumbledore smiled as he reclined in his chair. His plans were going very well. The muggles had outdone themselves in hating magic – and Harry, by extension. Harry was now timid, lacking in self confidence, doubtful of his own worth, and desperate for the smallest bit of praise, making it easy for Dumbledore to step in as the saviour. Best of all, Harry knew nothing about the magical world, and he was no better than a muggleborn at this stage. Dumbledore had always been amused by the wizarding world's disdain for the muggle-born witches and wizards. While many muggle-borns were equal in magical power and ability to their pureblood counterparts, they were also the easiest to manipulate. They knew nothing about the wizarding world, and consequently, by feeding them only 'approved' information, Dumbledore could indoctrinate them in his ideology without appearing to do so. Of course, unthinking obedience to Dumbledore was a small detail which was routinely drilled into the heads of the children. Hogwarts libraries contained only 'Ministry approved' books, but Dumbledore himself was on the committee for approving books and he would ensure the muggle-borns learnt only what he wanted them to learn. Some muggle-borns did wise up to the actual state of affairs in the wizarding world and chose to abandon

Dumbledore, but it took them at least a decade after Hogwarts to become sufficiently disillusioned with the prejudices and intricacies of the wizarding world and Dumbledore's policies. There was a large enough inflow of muggle-borns every year and this more than compensated for any loss, allowing Dumbledore to have a steady, if not growing, support base. Now Harry, the icon of the wizarding world, was in the same state. It was perfect.

Dumbledore mused where Harry would be put in Hogwarts – whether it was Gryffindor, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, Dumbledore had his plans perfectly in place to control the Boy-Who-Lived. His friends would be 'Dumbledore approved' too and the information he got would be limited at best. It should not pose too serious a problem if he ended up in any of the three Houses. The only unpredictable case was if Harry was sorted into Slytherin. Dumbledore had considered this case, and believed it most unlikely. He had a good insight into Harry's character, and judging by it, Harry was not devious or ambitious enough to be a Slytherin. Still, it would not pay to take chances. So he would send Hagrid to retrieve Harry and feed him information about Hogwarts, his parents and the magical world. He could rely on Hagrid's strong prejudices against Slytherin to ensure against any – mishaps – during Harry's sorting. He picked up a lemon drop. Life was very good indeed.

---(Scene Break)---

“Quirinius, what have you discovered about my 'nemesis'?", asked the high cold voice of Lord Voldemort.

“He is coming to Hogwarts this year, my Lord. The Headmaster is sending Hagrid to collect the boy and bring him to Diagon Alley on the last day of this month to get his supplies”, answered Quirrel in a timid voice.

“I see. Quirinius, I want you to go to Diagon Alley, and observe the boy for the day. Keep close to the oaf, and the boy, and report to me your insight about his nature.”

“Will you be accompanying me there, my Lord.”

“Of course not, you fool!”, hissed Voldemort. “There is always risk of detection in Diagon Alley. I will join you at nightfall and we shall make our way to Gringotts.”

“Certainly, my Lord.”

“Quirinius, I want you to see if you can learn exactly why my curse against the boy failed. I have a few ideas, but I want to see if he knows anything himself. However, do not, on any account, show an unhealthy interest in the boy's history. It will not do to have you under suspicion.”

“Of course, Master.”

“Remember, Quirinius, this is just a recon mission. You are to ensure that no harm befalls the boy from anyone, especially over-ambitious fools of my former followers. You will guard the boy with your life. Woe betide you if aught happens to him – you shall answer for it, head for a head.”

“As you command, my Lord. I will ensure nothing happens to him.”

“Good. I will keep in touch with you soon.”

---(End of the Chapter)---

(Author's Note: Try to guess the three muggle-borns and the three specimens of Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin. I'll give you a clue – the Slytherin specimen is not one of the parents of Millicent.)

## The Roaring Snake – 1

(Author's Note: I am taking a bit of artistic licence with regard to the wand cores – I seem to recollect JKR saying that it is only dragon heartstring, unicorn tail hair and phoenix feather that are used in Ollivander-made wands. Well, I am throwing that bit of canon out of the window. I am not going to make Harry's wand any different though – it is special enough as it is, and does not need to be any more special.

The chapter is more of a placeholder before the next chapter, which features the bulk of the manipulations, can be introduced. You will see the beginnings of Quirell-Voldemort's manipulation of Harry. I always wondered why Voldemort invariably tries to catch the files with vinegar instead of honey, so to speak. Anyway, I needed to set the pieces in places in this chapter.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

## Shopping in Diagon Alley

(The story begins with Harry and Hagrid arriving in the Leaky Cauldron.)

“Welcome back, Mr. Potter”, came another voice, echoing the same words the umpteenth time. Harry, who had never had a decent welcome in his living memory, was completely dumbfounded as he was mobbed by the hordes of wizards and witches in the pub. For a moment, Harry looked in serious danger of being stampeded by a herd of out-of-control people. However, a tall, stern looking witch had pushed her way through the crowd towards Harry, and raising her wand, set off a few bangs. Everyone backed away from Harry, and the witch spoke in her best classroom voice, “Mr. Potter is just back in the magical world. I hope you will not overwhelm the poor boy.” This had the desired effect, and most people backed away, although many were looking jealously at the professor who had Harry's undivided attention now. The tall witch seemed completely indifferent to the glares of the hoi-polloi – she placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and guided him deftly through the crowd. Once they were clear of milling crowd, she spoke, “Mr. Potter, I am Professor McGonagall, the

Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. I will be helping you get your supplies today.”

“Professor McGonagall! I didn’ know you’d be comin’ today”, broke in a surprised Hagrid.

“I am bringing the muggle-borns shopping in Diagon Alley”, she returned in her clipped tones.”

“She’s yer transfiguration teacher, Harry”, added Hagrid.

Harry bowed shyly, “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

McGonagall surveyed Harry from behind her square glasses and was shocked by what she saw. Harry looked badly undernourished and weak, a few inches shorter than he should be. He certainly did not look his age. Minerva wondered if the muggles had even been feeding him properly. No – Harry’s life with the muggles had definitely not been easy, Minerva concluded. She cursed herself for having allowed Dumbledore to put Harry with the muggles against her better judgement. Harry had suffered many privations and if she had any doubts, his clothes confirmed it. McGonagall had taken a quick look at Harry and had been astonished by the assortment of clothes Harry was wearing. His clothes had definitely not been designed for him. His jeans were patched in a couple of places and were three sizes too large for him, and his over-large shirt had faded from the original blue to an indeterminate hue somewhere between the lees of wine, and a heavenly azure. Deciding to confirm her suspicions, she spoke in her cool, grave voice, “Mr. Potter, surely you could have made yourself a little more presentable? Certainly Hagrid told you that you are a celebrity in our world?”

Harry flushed scarlet, while Hagrid broke in, “Those damned muggles kept him like this, Professor.”

Minerva’s lips had gone white, and her grip on Harry’s shoulder tightened. “We will have to remedy that, but for now ..”. She drew her wand and waved it casually. Harry’s shirt, suddenly fit him, had returned to its former glory and his jeans looked brand new. Harry’s mouth fell open as he noticed that his shoes too were now

immaculate, and eyeing Harry critically, Minerva smiled, "That is better."

She turned and gestured to a few other kids and, from the looks of it, their parents, to follow her. Once out of the Leaky Cauldron, she began the introductions, "Mr. Potter, this is Ms. Abbott", she nodded to a blond girl with pig-tails, who smiled at Harry, as Minerva continued, "and Mrs. Abbott." A plump middle-aged woman nodded amiably. "This is Mr. Finch-Fletchley." The tall, curly-haired boy greeted Harry quietly. "Mrs. Finch-Fletchley." The aristocratic woman bowed. "This is Ms. Brocklehurst", the shy brown-haired girl looked up at Harry tentatively. "Finally, this is Mr. Brocklehurst", introduced Professor McGonagall as the tall man spoke, "Nice to meet you Mr. Potter."

"Good morning, Mr. Potter", came a quiet, halting voice from behind. All the present spun backward as a tall and nervous looking young man appeared, "Quirinius", said Minerva sharply, "I was not aware you would be in the Diagon Alley today."

"I h-had t-to pick up some st-stuff", he stuttered. He walked up to Prof. McGonagall, and whispered, "Don't you think it is best if we all hang together today, Minerva? You saw what happened when Harry got swamped by that crowd. No telling when another bunch will do it again."

Minerva was not exactly pleased with the appearance of Quirrel, but his words made sense. No sense neglecting precautions for Harry. She agreed, and spoke, "Everyone, this is Prof. Quirrel – your Defence Against Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts." There were many mumbled greetings at this, and Minerva continued, addressing the gathering, "I think we should first go to Gringotts and change your money into wizarding currency." At Harry's questioning look, she answered, "Mr. Potter, your parents have set up a trust fund for you, so you need not worry about converting money. Let us go."

It was a short walk of a few minutes to Gringotts, and they all followed Hagrid, Professors Quirrel and McGonagall to the bank. Harry had fallen back to speak with Finch-Fletchley, while the two girls were jabbering together.

The curly haired boy offered his hand, “Justin Finch-Fletchley”, He smiled at Harry rather impishly, “Quite a reception you got there.”

Harry looked bemused, “I wish I knew what they’re all so excited about”, he muttered.

“You don’t know why they mobbed you?”

“Well, I know what it’s supposed to be, but I’ve really done nothing to deserve that.”

“What d’you mean?”

Harry gave an abbreviated version of his own history. Harry told him how he had grown up in the muggle world, and how precious little he knew of the magical world. Justin nodded sympathetically, “I understand. I’m muggle born myself – my mum’s a professor of Physics, and dad’s got his own wood-cutting factory. No one in my family is magic and I was actually set to go to Eton. Mum and dad were pleased to see that I had magical talent.”

Harry nodded, “Good. We can learn together, then”, he remarked, slightly mollified that he would not be the only one starting at scratch at Hogwarts.

The two boys got along very well, and soon they were swapping details of their life, when they reached Gringotts. Before they knew it, they were in the wizarding bank and being led by goblins. While Minerva was arranging for the muggles to convert their money, Hagrid and Professor Quirrel were talking together.

Hagrid spoke about taking Harry down to his vaults and also a task for Dumbledore. Quirrel interrupted haltingly, “Hagrid, why don’t you go on and complete the task Dumbledore gave you? I will take Mr. Potter down to his vaults.”

“Suits me, Professor”, returned Hagrid.

Accompanied by a Gringotts goblin, Harry and Quirrel went down to his vaults. On the way, Quirrel questioned Harry about his relatives. Harry did not want to answer much – it was too embarrassing, but he did give out that his relatives did not like magic and had not told him anything about the magical world. It was not like he could have concealed that bit of knowledge – Harry's complete ignorance about the wizarding world gave away that. Then the talk turned to Professor Quirrel's subject. Quirrel smiled grimly, "Yes, Mr. Potter, I teach Defence Against the Dark Arts." He looked at Harry contemplatively, and smiled, "You, in particular, will need it. You will do well to pay attention to the subject. Your very life depends on it."

"What do you mean, Professor?"

Quirrel looked sharply at Harry, "Potter, do you remember nothing of the night the Dark Lord attacked your parents and you?"

Harry shook his head in mute ignorance, as Quirrel continued, "Mr. Potter, the Dark Lord chose to target you. You survived, while the Dark Lord was broken. This means you are a celebrity in our world. Celebrities usually have a lot of enemies."

"But who would have a grudge against me?"

Quirrel looked as though he was debating whether to answer that question. He finally replied carefully, "Mr. Potter, while the Dark Lord may be gone, there are a number of his followers who were never caught and are still free today. Plenty of them were displeased with the disappearance of the Dark Lord – the will never forgive you what you did to the Dark Lord. Further, you are the famed vanquisher of the Dark Lord. This makes you a tempting target for every potential dark wizard. Defeating you – which is, by extension, killing you – would give your murderer a great deal of notoriety, which is what the dark wizards seek. But there are a whole lot of other people who would just love to show you up and prove you are unworthy of your fame. You will find things none too easy, I am afraid,"

Harry gulped, "So I am in danger in the wizarding world?"

Quirrel nodded grimly, "That would be a classic understatement. It would be a cruel deception to pretend otherwise."

"Professor, is there anything I can start doing?"

Quirrel nodded thoughtfully, "You should begin preparing your defences against Dark Arts as soon as possible. You should have begun by now, but it is too late to change the past. I suggest you start with a few books on the theory of curses in particular and magical theory in general. I can suggest titles – get hold of them at Flourish and Blotts and start reading and preparing. Don't try casting any of the spells until you come to Hogwarts. The Ministry keeps an eye on underage practitioners of magic and you will be in trouble if you start practising spells in a muggle area."

Harry nodded his thanks, but Quirrel waved them away. Harry reached his vault, and with Professor Quirrel's help, grabbed enough to last him a couple of terms. The two then rode the cart back with the Gringotts goblin to the surface.

When Harry reached the surface, Professor McGonagall was with the other muggles and the muggle-borns, along with Hagrid. However, there were six other people – or more accurately, three children of roughly Harry's own age and three adults – who were waiting,

Prof. McGonagall introduced the newcomers swiftly. A tall distinguished looking man dressed in expensive black trimmed silver robes was introduced as Emmanuel Goldstein1 – an enchanter of note, and his son – a middle sized, dark haired boy with a thoughtful expression – was introduced as Anthony Goldstein. The square jawed witch with greying hair and a monocle was introduced as Amelia Bones – the head of Magical Law Enforcement. Her niece, a small, round faced girl, was called Susan Bones. Finally, a small and slender lady with flashing blue eyes was introduced as Priscilla Greengrass – one of the top healers at St. Mungo. Her daughter, a slim girl with the same eyes, was Daphne Greengrass.

Harry had been completely thrown by the interest in him by the high and the mighty in the wizarding world and more than a little uncomfortable with the attention directed at him. The adults soon saw

his discomfiture and let him be, but not so the children. Both Susan Bones and Anthony Goldstein had pounced on him – figuratively, that is – immediately. Poor Harry would have retreated completely into his shell, but the others would not let him. Harry was being bombarded with questions by both Anthony Goldstein and Susan Bones – after all, they had all grown up with the legend of the Boy-Who-Lived and now that the original was available in person, they were more than a little curious. Justin Finch-Fletchley had faded into the background now that the others had monopolised Harry's attention. Mandy Brocklehurst and Hannah Abbott were conversing quietly between themselves – they too were not very comfortable around the greatest of the wizarding world. Only Daphne Greengrass, however, held herself cool and aloof. She had greeted Harry with quiet courtesy, but from that time, she listened to the others question Harry, but had said little herself. The interrogation of Harry would have continued, but for the fact that they had arrived at the apothecary and needed to buy potion ingredients. The apothecary was interesting enough – the horrible smell was more than made up for by the variety of potion ingredients.

Harry spoke in an undertone to Anthony and Susan, "You must know a lot of magic already."

Anthony shook his head, "Not really – I have read books, of course, but not performed much magic. Never had a wand before to do it."

Harry looked at the boy in surprise, as Susan explained, "Harry, did you never wonder why we are not trained in magic earlier?" At Harry's negative gesture, she continued, "We are not old enough to control the magic before eleven. We can seriously injure ourselves if we try to do magic when we are too young."

'Yes, that made sense', thought Harry. Harry was very interested in the magical world, and his curiosity overcame his reticence. But he remembered Justin had not known anything about the magical world either, being muggle-born. Harry had suffered enough through neglect of others and complete ignorance – he would make sure that others did not suffer the same fatal flaw if he could help it. By quietly involving Justin as well in the conversation, Harry had sent out the unspoken signal to the others that he would not leave the muggle-

born boy to hang. That accomplished, he began sating his curiosity about the magical world. For a moment, he thought he found a look of approval in Daphne Greengrass's eyes – however, the next moment, the girl was her usual calm and reserved self. Even discounting Daphne's silence, both Anthony and Susan were more than happy to tell Harry and Justin about the magical world, and the four would converse together the entire morning.

In quick succession, the group bought the uniform robes, brass scales, telescope and cauldron, before going for the schoolbooks at Flourish and Blotts. Harry quietly asked Prof. McGonagall and Prof. Quirrel if any other books would be useful apart from the prescribed ones. He got an approving smile and a list of titles from the stern Transfiguration professor. Prof. Quirrel, however, disappeared and returned with three books. He gave them to Harry and told him that the books would be his birthday present. Poor Harry, who had never had a decent birthday before, was stammering his thanks incoherently before the pale professor had finished. After buying the books, they decided to go for their wands at Ollivander's. Everyone was excited as they entered the tiny shop. Harry wondered how so many people would be able to fit into the small place, but his concerns were unfounded. The walls of the shop shimmered for a moment, before enlarging into a much larger space which could easily accommodate the sixteen visitors. The eerie looking, misty eyed, old man had decided to allow the ladies first.

Susan Bones got a ten and a half inch wand of cedar and unicorn tail hair – one great for counter-curses, from the description of Ollivander. This apparently pleased Amelia Bones since she was looking particularly proud of her niece. Daphne Greengrass got a nine inch wand of maple and chimaera fur, with a propensity for healing spells. Mandy Brocklehurst got an eight and three quarter inch springy wand of birch and thunderbird feather – good all round with few weaknesses, Mr. Ollivander had described the wand as. Hannah Abbott, after some difficulty in finding a wand, got a well-balanced whippy eleven and a half inch wand of oak and phoenix feather, and Finch-Fletchley got a supple, yet powerful thirteen inch ironwood wand with a cockatrice feather for the core, while Anthony Goldstein got a swishy twelve inch wand of teak and griffin feather – specialised for enchantments, according to Ollivander. Harry who was the last to

try, had to try a large number of wands and finally ended up with a wand of holly and phoenix feather – the brother wand of the Dark Lord, which drew a large number of gasps, especially from the adult wizards and witches. Lady Greengrass and Madam Bones were both looking in genuine astonishment at Harry for the first time – gone was the distant, professional look they had been sporting during the shopping.

By this time, it was mid afternoon, and Prof. McGonagall interjected, “Let us all have lunch. We can complete the shopping afterwards.”

Everyone agreed and they walked to Florean Fortescue's Parlour. Just as they were about to enter, a cold, drawling voice broke in over them, “Welcome back to the wizarding world, Mr. Potter”. Minerva spun round to check the source of the interruption, and barely bit back the curse that had automatically sprung to the tip of her tongue – for in the pale, sneering figure that had greeted Harry, she recognised the despised face of Lucius Malfoy.

1Shades of George Orwell – but it lends itself superbly, thanks to the surname.

## The Roaring Snake – 2

(Author's Note: The whole bit about there being only two factions essentially – a 'Light' and a 'Dark' – is a little too simplistic, in my opinion. This story will contain more than two factions, and every faction has its own agenda. Harry being an important catch, many factions will be vying for his favour. It also struck me as pretty ridiculous that people of significance like Lucius Malfoy try to attack Harry (verbally or physically) rather than entice him with useful offers. Scrimgoeर in HBP was the only one who offered Harry some goodies in exchange for cooperation. Given the tumultuous reaction Harry received in Diagon Alley when he arrived for the first time, does it not strike anyone as strange that no one tried to approach Harry for favours afterwards?

As usual, all criticism is welcome)

### The Best Birthday?

"I'm sorry", muttered Harry, looking bemusedly at the aristocratic man with pale, pointed features. "Do I know you?"

"I don't believe we've met before, Mr. Potter. I'm Lucius Malfoy", the blond man introduced himself. Two other figures had followed Lucius Malfoy, and the Malfoy patriarch introduced them as well, "My wife, Narcissa". The tall, regal, blond haired woman inclined her head politely, even if the bow was perfunctory and had been tempered with more than a tinge of haughtiness. "And my son, Draco. He will be in your year." A sneering boy of Harry's age nodded coldly at Harry.

"Nice to meet you all", returned Harry politely, accepting the hand Mr. Malfoy had put forth.

"I believe today is your birthday, Mr. Potter?", queried Lucius Malfoy.

"Yes, but how ..."

"Harry, most of the wizarding world has sent you at least greeting cards on your birthday", giggled Susan, interpreting his question correctly and handing him her own greeting, even as both Daphne

and Anthony did the same. “Surely you've got them before?”, Susan continued, surprised at Harry's frown.

Harry shook his head in mute denial, which raised eyebrows from all the adults and Amelia Bones asked rather sharply, “Do you mean to imply that you've never got greeting cards from the wizarding world before?”

Harry shook his head, and although there were raised eyebrows, exchanged glances and frowns from McGonagall, Emmanuel Goldstein, and Lady Greengrass, none of them said anything. “Not even Ministry correspondence? There are many things that should have reached you, Mr. Potter.”

Once more, Harry shook his head in denial, as Amelia muttered, “I shall have this looked into. It may be a simple mistake, of course, ..”

“Tsk! Tsk!”, deplored Narcissa in her cool voice. “I've always held that those muggles should never have been accorded guardianship of Mr. Potter. I trust, Minerva, this proves to you Dumbledore's folly of allowing muggles control over wizarding children, much less someone as prominent as Mr. Potter here.” Minerva flushed at the comment, as Hagrid returned, “I'm sure Dumbledore had 'is reasons for puttin' Harry with 'is aunt.”

In the meantime, Lucius Malfoy had turned towards Prof. McGonagall drawling coldly, “I think, Minerva, we should have a nice birthday cake here to celebrate Mr. Potter's birthday. It would be remarkably ungrateful of the wizarding world to ignore the birthday of its saviour.” He had managed to inject a lot of spite into something so benign.

“We've arranged to celebrate Mr. Potter's birthday later, Mr. Malfoy”, returned Minerva quietly. “We still have a bit of shopping to do, and today would be most inconvenient to spend time on a party.”

Narcissa's eyes had lighted upon the shopping bags of the children, “Pardon me if I'm wrong, Minerva, but you seem to have completed most of the shopping. In fact, I cannot see anything you've missed!”

"We need ter get the pets for the kids, and potion stuff", boomed Hagrid.

Lucius sneered coldly, looking at Hagrid as if he was something unpleasant on his shoe, "That will not be a problem, Hagrid. There are still several hours of daylight, and you were anyway about to have lunch. Surely, you can spare a few minutes after the lunch to give Mr. Potter a well-deserved birthday party."

"Lucius, there are these other children to think of, and Mr. Potter is my charge today ...". objected Minerva desperately.

Lucius overrode her objections in style, as he countered, "Of course, I would not dream of depriving you of your charge, Minerva, nor of denying these children the chance of celebrating with Harry Potter his birthday. They are all invited as well." There was a world of sarcasm as he continued smoothly, "We all know the importance of integrating the muggle-born children into the wizarding world, don't we, Minerva?"

Minerva bit her lip – acknowledge the courtesy she would not; refuse it she could not. Even worse, Minerva was conscious of the glares of the others she had invited. This had not at all been planned, and she was in a quandary. She wanted to introduce Harry gently into the wizarding world – to show him its complexity, its wonder. A quiet lunch, with a frank and candid discussion about the wizarding world and Hogwarts was her idea of celebrating Harry's birthday. Making a song and dance out of it in the form of an ostentatious spectacle, courtesy the Malfoys, was not her idea of a good birthday for Harry.

Harry, on the other hand, had been floored. He was rather happy that at least someone had remembered his birthday. On the other hand, if Susan Bones were to be believed – and he had no reason to disbelieve her – the wizarding world had always remembered his birthday and sent him greetings. Why had he never received any of them over the years? What had become of them? He resolved to ask Prof. McGonagall, who seemed to be in-charge of the group, later on. Instinctively, Harry had been slightly repulsed by the Malfoys' manner of taking people for granted. Harry had also noticed the snobbish attitude of Lucius and Draco Malfoy – the way they looked at the

muggle-born kids as though they were bits of dirt. Harry had never taken to elitism very well – his experience of it with the Dursleys left him with a suspicion of anyone with that attitude. However, he could not deny that the Malfoys had been most generous in offering to select his birthday. He then remembered Quirrell's warning – he should be cautious if he wanted to live long enough. Well – that was sensible advice. He would be on his guard around the Malfoys.

Coolly taking Minerva's silence for assent, Lucius Malfoy, in the meantime, called to Florean Fortescue, "Mr. Fortescue, I take it that your halls upstairs are ready?"

"Certainly, Mr. Malfoy. Everything's ready."

"Excellent!", replied Lucius Malfoy. "In that case, you can bring us all lunch and then we'll go upstairs to celebrate Mr. Potter's birthday."

A simple lunch was served and Minerva quickly steered the conversation into territory she wanted. She spoke about the education at Hogwarts and the kinds of magic they would learn. She also spoke of the four Houses at the school.

"What House is the best, Professor?", asked Justin.

Minerva shook her head, "There's no 'best' House, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. Every House has its strengths. Gryffindors are brave and chivalrous, Ravenclaws are prized for their intelligence and wit, Hufflepuff are known for their hard-work, loyalty, and fairplay, while Slytherins are famed for their ambition, resourcefulness, and determination. All four Houses have produced some outstanding wizards and witches. In fact, at this very table, you can see some of the finest example of all of them."

Lucius Malfoy drawled, "Well – Slytherin is an excellent place for wizards of good ancestry and it teaches us to prize our heritage. It is the place ideal for all budding leaders."

Hagrid's voice boomed, "It's a grea' place fer dark wizards, Malfoy."

“Dear, dear, Hagrid – I suppose it would be futile to ask you to recognise the greatness of the House for wizards and witches of good breeding”, sneered Lucius. He looked Hagrid up and down slowly, “All things considered, it is no surprise”, he murmured silkily.

Minerva's whip-like voice cut in. “Please, Lucius. If you'd let me explain, I'd be obliged.”

“Of course, Professor McGonagall. Feel free to take the stage”, he waved his hand in a mock invitation.

“Well, as I said – at this very table are some of the best examples of all four Houses. Amelia here was in Hufflepuff, and she is the not only the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, but also one of the best Aurors ever.”

“Auror?”, echoed Mandy Brocklehurst blankly.

“Aurors are, I believe, the equivalent of the muggle 'police', Ms. Brocklehurst.”, returned Prof. McGonagall, as she continued, “Mr. Goldstein here, one of the most successful businessmen in our world, was a Ravenclaw. He is also one of the finest Enchanters in this country.”

Emmanuel Goldstein bowed. “You flatter me, Minerva.”

“It is the truth, Emmanuel”, smiled Prof. McGonagall. “And finally, we have Lady Greengrass, one of the best examples of Slytherins. She is among the finest ever Healers in St. Mungo's hospital.”

Priscilla Greengrass smiled as Hagrid cut in acidly, “You-Know-Who was also a Slytherin, as were most of the Death Eaters.”

“The previous Dark Lord, Grindelwald, was a Gryffindor”, snapped Priscilla in return. She looked around quietly as she leant back in her chair, “Dark wizards have come from all the Houses, and are not the privilege of any one House in particular.” Hagrid squirmed – this was going completely contrary to what Prof. Dumbledore had wanted. The headmaster had asked Hagrid to bias Harry against the Slytherins, and here was the conversation going completely out of control.

Harry, who had not failed to observe that Prof. McGonagall had completely overlooked the Malfoys, wondered if there was any animosity between the two, or whether in Prof. McGonagall's assessment, the Malfoys did not rate high because they did not deserve to rate high. However, he queried, "What about Gryffindor, Professor?", queried Harry.

"The present headmaster, and the greatest wizard on earth, Prof. Dumbledore was a Gryffindor."

"And you as well, Minerva", smiled Emmanuel. "You sell your accomplishments short", he added, shaking his head.

"As Emmanuel remarked, I am the current head of Gryffindor", completed Minerva.

"What House were you in, Mr. Malfoy?", asked Justin.

Lucius Malfoy looked at the boy as if he was a bit of dirt, before replying in his supercilious voice, "Slytherin, of course. It is, as I commented before now, the best place for students of good talent and parentage."

Minerva cut in, "Lucius, please! I had not finished yet!" She looked at the muggle-born students and Harry, "If you have any questions about the Houses, you may ask the best authorities on them", she smiled, waving towards Mr. Goldstein, Mme. Bones, Lady Greengrass and herself. A babble of questions from Justin, Harry, Mandy and Hannah followed the announcement of Prof. McGonagall. They all asked what kinds of things they could look forward to in the Houses, what was lauded, what was discouraged, House rules in particular. Also in the list of questions were the facilities in the Houses, the Heads of the Houses, and what was expected of the newcomers, and so forth. The group invited by Minerva cheerfully answered all the questions.

Harry had been seated between Emmanuel Goldstein and Minerva McGonagall, and he murmured to Prof. McGonagall, "Professor, what House were my parents in?"

“Both of them were in Gryffindor, Mr. Potter.”

“You knew them?”

“I taught them both. Your father was one of the best in Transfiguration, and a superb Quidditch player.” Minerva’s lips quirked as she continued, “He had a whole lot of admirers and friends who followed him all round the school. Your mother on the other hand was a model student – clever, and determined at her work. She was also a most accomplished Charms mistress and a potions brewer. Emmanuel here can tell you more about your mother though, Mr. Potter.”

Harry turned expectantly to Mr. Goldstein, who chuckled at Harry’s curious expression and began relating a number of small incidents about his mother. Finally, lunch was finished and the cold voice of Lucius Malfoy cut across their discussion, “Mr. Potter, if you would please follow us.”

The whole group trooped upstairs and Harry gasped at the colourful decorations in the hall. To say that the setting was opulent was a complete understatement, and Harry was completely flabbergasted. He had seen the Dursleys entertain their guests in style, but nothing he had seen compared with the show the Malfoys had put up for his sake. The entire hall was adorned with fairy lights that looked alive. A soft and calming tone was playing in the background, and the ceiling was decked with red and white flowers that set themselves into various patterns. At present, they read, “Happy Birthday, Harry Potter!” A monster of a cake was laid on the table, and Harry was invited to blow out the candles and cut it.

As the pieces of the cake were distributed, Narcissa and Draco had flanked Harry, and the Malfoy matriarch was quizzing him about his home-life, quietly but firmly. Harry tried to give her evasive answers, but he got the feeling that the aristocratic lady had seen through all his answers and knew the truth. Draco, meanwhile, had been peppering Harry about the achievements of the Malfoys and their wealth. The talk turned towards muggle-born and Draco expressed the conviction that muggle-born witches and wizards should not be allowed into Hogwarts.

Harry shrugged indifferently, and was more than a little confused at the vehemence of Draco's sentiments regarding the muggle-born. Harry was mostly non-committal – he had little love for muggles as most of those he had known had been unpleasant to him, but he also had just made a muggle-born friend in the form of Justin – probably the first in his life and he bore no hatred against the muggle-born. Seeing that the job of getting Harry to think on the issue had been accomplished, and fearing that Draco might do more harm than good by trying to bias Harry with his own prejudices, Narcissa came to his rescue. "Draco, let us speak of something more pleasant!", she remonstrated with him softly, but firmly.

"Like what?", asked Draco.

"Like Quidditch", returned Narcissa with a hint of amusement. Turning to Harry, she remarked, "I think your father would be proud if you were to play the game well, Harry." Narcissa looked closely at Harry as she proceeded, "You do look a lot like James, but you have Lily's eyes."

Harry who had been desperate for any information regarding his father, instantaneously seized upon that. "You knew my parents?"

Narcissa shook her head, "Not very well, I am afraid. I was several years ahead of your parents at Hogwarts, and afterwards, we lost touch with each other."

Seeing Harry's crestfallen expression, she continued, "But, I do know a bit of your family history. Your family is one of the noblest in the country, Harry. I am sure they will be looking to you to uphold the tradition of a thousand years", she smiled, drawing a book on important pureblood families of Great Britain from her robes and handing it to him. "Your birthday present", she remarked, her lips quirking in a slight smile. "You will find much information about your ancestors in the book."

Of course, what was unknown to Harry was that it was a volume on pureblood history that had been written by an author biased towards the Malfoy family – one which portrayed the Malfoys in terms far more

flattering than any author in his right mind would care to use regarding the Malfoys.

Harry was stuttering worse than Quirrell when he accepted the gift from Narcissa. He protested that they were too kind and they need not go to that expense for him, but was told that it was no problem, and was just what he deserved.

For the remainder of the party, despite Harry's numerous attempts to involve the rest of the group in the conversation, Draco monopolised Harry's attention, while his parents distracted the others. Draco bombarded Harry with information about Quidditch and its various rules.

Finally, the party came to an end and the Malfoys told Harry that he was welcome at their Manor if he wanted to spend the rest of his holidays with them. The offer had elicited gasps of horror from the other adults. Minerva wanted to desperately stop this somehow, but she need not have worried as Amelia Bones came to the rescue, "I am afraid, Lucius, that Mr. Potter will need to be at his relatives' home over the next few days at least. He has reported that he has not got any mail from the wizarding world, including the Ministry correspondence, in the last ten years. We'll need to perform a few tests at his aunt's home, and that requires Mr. Potter's presence there. Finally, given his peculiar safety considerations, you need to have his magical guardian's signature to invite him to your Manor."

"Surely, Amelia, you can perform most of the tests without requiring his presence? And I promise to bring him to his aunt's home whenever he is required to be there. As for the guardian's signature, I am sure that a compromise can be arranged"

"I am sorry, Lucius, but his presence at his relatives' home is mandatory as we complete the investigations. Finally, as Head of DMLE, you cannot expect me to countenance breaking the law, especially when Mr. Potter's safety considerations are concerned."

"Are you insinuating that my home is unsafe, Mme. Bones?" Lucius was at his intimidating best.

"Lucius, you know perfectly well that taking a child without the permission of the guardian constitutes kidnapping", snapped Amelia. "In this case, I must insist that even in your case, you procure the consent of the guardian. Of course, should you be able to convince his guardians of the benignity of your request, I will stand aside."

"I see, Amelia. I am rather disappointed about your quibbling over technicalities, but I will not press my invitation for now. It is most unfortunate that you should be so bureaucratic."

Amelia Bones said nothing, but her scowl indicated how little she relished getting into a tiff with Lucius. Harry cut in diplomatically, "It is alright, Mr. Malfoy. Thanks for the party and the invitation. Maybe I'll be able to visit you sometime." Lucius and Narcissa were plainly disappointed that their plan to get Harry to visit the Malfoy Manor had not fructified, but there was nothing to do but to accept the situation as it was.

With the Malfoys gone, Harry and the remainder of the group completed their shopping quickly. Harry, Justin and Hannah all bought owls at the Eyelops Emporium and then purchased their potions supplies. Harry promised to write to Anthony, Susan, and Justin over the remainder of the holidays and they in turn to him. Susan, Anthony and Daphne left with their parents, and Professor McGonagall asked Quirinius Quirrell to take the muggle-borns back by portkey. It was obvious that Quirrell wanted to talk a little more with Harry, but he did not dare disobey McGonagall directly. Minerva took Harry back to the Leaky Cauldron and they had a cup of tea. Over tea, Minerva spoke, "Now that you've seen the Wizarding World, Harry, what do you think of it?"

Harry was startled at the usage of his first name, but spoke punctiliously, "It's very interesting, Professor. Would you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?"

At the older witch's encouraging nod, Harry began hesitantly, "Professor, Susan mentioned that she and many others had sent greeting cards to me. Why did I never receive any?"

Minerva could very well guess the reasons for this, but evidently thought it prudent not to mention her suspicions. "Amelia is going to be looking into it. I will keep you informed, Harry."

Harry nodded, as he continued, "Why does Mr. Malfoy dislike Justin and Hannah?"

Minerva looked sharply and anxiously at the boy, "What gives you the idea?"

"Professor – please – the way the Malfoys were looking at Justin and Hannah told me they thought little of them. And Draco told me that he thought muggle-borns should not be allowed in Hogwarts."

Minerva sighed, "I was hoping you would not have to see this aspect of the wizarding world so early, Harry. There are several wizards and witches of magical ancestry in this country who believe that magical education should be limited to witches and wizards of magical parentage. However, that has never been the dominant opinion and muggle-born mages have always been admitted at Hogwarts."

Harry could, in a way, understand the sentiment that muggles should be kept away from the witches and wizards. The muggles he had lived with hated and tortured him for being a wizard. At school, he had always been neglected and ignored, and his magical talents – which had caused some 'incidents' had always caused him to be looked on with suspicion. It was only understandable that wizards should return the hatred that the muggles seemed to have for wizards. He filed away the information for future use, and proceeded, "I see, Professor. Another question. What was that about Death Eaters?"

"Death Eaters were followers of You-Know-Who, Harry. They perpetrated numerous outrages in the last war."

"Harry", she continued looking very anxious and serious, "I promised your father that I would care for you if anything happened to your parents and I intend to take my promise seriously. You are an icon, a celebrity in the wizarding world. This means that you will have a large number of people vying for your favour. Almost everyone in the wizarding world has an agenda regarding you – including the people

you met today." She gently placed her hand on the boy's shoulder, "You need to be careful, child. People will try to control you, to manipulate you. You need to understand the wizarding world very well. Even those who are not your enemies and mean you no harm have their own goals as far as you are concerned. I see that you've bought a few volumes on wizarding culture, history and the previous war. May I recommend that you pay attention to recent events in history – in particular, the last war?"

Harry nodded earnestly, and Minerva, looking old and tired, continued, "Harry, may an old woman offer you some pieces of advice regarding the wizarding world?"

"Of course, Professor."

"Apart from history, and tradition, you will need to concentrate on Defence against the Dark Arts. You won us the last war, but it was a most unexpected victory for us. With the Dark Lord gone, many, if not most of his followers, slipped back amongst us. Nothing could be proven against them, and those that are still around hate you. You should be safe enough at Hogwarts, and at your aunt's place, but one can never be careful enough."

Once more, Harry nodded, "Harry, you should also be acquainted with the current events." At this point, she reached into her bag and took a small envelope. Starting tomorrow, I have bought you a subscription of the Daily Prophet – the most common magical newspaper in Britain – for one year. Read the events and keep yourself up to date. Not for long will you be able to keep your neutrality, Harry, and everything you do will have much more bearing. You will be watched and every action of yours catalogued. You will have to make some choices soon enough. Whatever you decide, I want you to make informed choices, and I want you to be happy with them." She squeezed his shoulder gently. Harry thanked her for the gift, and Minerva finished her tea and rose to her feet. She was back to the Professor mode as she handed him an envelope, "You'll need to come to Hogwarts from the King's Cross station in London on the first of September. Inside, the envelope are the ticket and instructions on how to get onto the platform. Now, it is time for you to return to

your aunt. If you have any problems, you can send us a letter through your owl. She'll know where to find us."

She took Harry into the muggle train station and then saw him off back to Little Whinging on a train. As the train departed, Minerva eyed the disappearing train for a moment, and smiled wistfully, "Be safe and happy, Harry. Good luck", she muttered. She shook herself out of her reverie and disapparated back to Hogsmeade with a small pop.

---(End of the Chapter)---

## The Roaring Snake – 3

(Author's Note: In this chapter, one gets glimpses of the various factions, their goals, and their leaders which are vying for Harry's attention. I hope that at least a few factions will be novel. At least, I have not read much of the various factions. This is one of my more daring forays into the various groups in the Wizarding world.

My second point of departure is my attempt to distinguish Fudge from the Ministry. One of my pet peeves in fan fiction is the way people illogically conjoin the interest of the Ministry with the interest of the Minister. This falls into the same trap as claiming that national interest coincides with the political interest of the leader. By the same token, I am going to distinguish between Voldemort and the Dark. Their interests may coincide most of the time, but they are not the same. Voldemort is a megalomaniac – he is on his own side and his only interest is his self-interest. He struck me as the kind who sees everyone, everything and every cause as something that exists to serve the greater glory of Voldemort. A pertinent question that no one has ever asked in fan fiction, as far as I know, is whether Voldemort's interest coincides with the interest of the Dark.

Finally, since this is AU, I am keeping Regulus Black and Rabastan Lestrange alive and free. Anyone who has read my other fictions should know that the Lestrange family members have always interested me!

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

### Behind the Scenes

Albus Dumbledore was not having a good evening. First, Hagrid had returned to Hogwarts with the information that his trip with Harry had gone all wrong. Not only had Harry met Minerva, and several others of his year, but also met some of the most important and powerful people in the magical world. From what Hagrid had said, he had gone wild buying books at Flourish and Blotts. While this was not bad in itself, Harry had bought more books than necessary not only on school subjects, but also on recent history, wizarding customs, and prevailing political views. All of this was extremely worrying, from

Dumbledore's perspective. Even worse, Amelia was now aware of Harry's non-receipt of post from the magical world. While Albus was completely invulnerable to Amelia's actions on the legal front – the headmaster was no fool and had secured his position carefully – his carefully constructed image could take a huge beating if he was seen as intercepting the letters of the Boy-Who-Lived and keeping him ignorant. No, he had to act and act fast if he was to redeem the situation to any degree. His first action should be deduce how badly his relationship with Minerva had suffered. However, Minerva had not yet returned, so he decided to ensure that his other machinations were in proper order.

Dumbledore slumped in his chair as he reflected that he had been mostly unsuccessful in convincing Minerva of his concern for Harry. Now, in addition to making sure Harry made the 'right friends' at Hogwarts, he would have to keep Minerva and Harry apart as much as possible.

As for the friends of Potter, Dumbledore had already set his plans in motion. He would make doubly sure of the whole thing by sending one of his flunkies over summer to Harry Potter. A bit of influence and nudging on what Harry should be allowed to feel about the Headmaster and his agenda would not be amiss.

He reached into a drawer in his desk, took a pinch of a glittering powder, and tossing it into the fire called, "Weasley residence!"

---(Scene Break)---

Amelia Bones had not been idle either. She took Susan back home and immediately invited her colleague and chief prosecutor, Andromeda Black-Tonks, to come and have tea with her.

Ten minutes later, the immaculately groomed and perfectly dressed Andromeda Black-Tonks, with her dark brown hair and eyes, proud carriage, and noble bearing, looking every inch the aristocratic pureblood that she was, had emerged from the fireplace in the Bones Manor. Her voice was mellifluous, and her manner engaging. Amelia bade Andromeda be seated, had her secretary bring them both tea, and briefly narrated the tale of her morning with Harry Potter.

Andromeda reclined in her chair, and sighed, “I know what you are thinking, Amelia. But we have very little jurisdiction.”

Amelia's face was neutral as she asked, “How so?”

“Dumbledore secured full guardian rights in the magical world over Harry Potter. Dumbledore is perfectly entitled to intercept, open and read Harry's correspondence. Even to visit or speak to Harry Potter, you need permission from Dumbledore. We don't even know where Mr. Potter lives.”

“How come they granted him such extensive rights?”

“Fudge signed an order granting Dumbledore full rights over Potter nearly ten years ago. It was claimed that Potter was under serious threat from You-Know-Who's followers and as such needed heavy protection.”

Amelia, who was not very familiar with the Potter situation, was amazed to say the least. “Is there no way to remedy it, Andy?”

“We could charge Dumbledore with negligence and dereliction of duty in informing Mr. Potter of Ministry correspondence. However, I would not give an obole for our chances of making it stick in the Wizengamot. At worst, the old coot will get a mild censure, probably disapproval over the matter. Nothing more.”

“Potter cannot complain of the treatment he is getting?”

“He can, but Dumbledore will invoke security problems with giving Potter any amount of freedom, and the old goats in the Wizengamot will go along with Dumbledore rather than Potter any day.”

Amelia sighed in resignation, “The Ministry is being torn apart. Nearly everyone, especially in our Department, has loyalties elsewhere – to Fudge, to Dumbledore, to the pureblood crowd. None of them are concerned about doing what we are paid for – upholding the law. Duty takes second place the moment it conflicts with their principal loyalty. If we can persuade Potter to support our campaign to have

the Ministry doing what it is supposed to do, everyone in the wizarding world would benefit. From what I saw today morning, he seems like a nice and honest boy. I want to keep faith with him – by doing an honest job on a very real problem he is facing, we should be able to send him a token of the Ministry's commitment, faith and honesty.”

“It's hard to know what we can do”, returned Andromeda.

Amelia nodded sadly, “Once the term begins, I'll ask Susan to keep close to him. In the meantime, we cannot even send a letter to him?”

“I suppose we can. Or at least, Susan can. As long as it is bereft of political agenda or a hindrance to Dumbledore's control, I don't think Dumbledore will interrupt it now that Harry knows of his letters going missing.”

Amelia nodded as Andy rose to her feet. “My daughter, Nymphadora, is the head girl this year. I'll ask her to help Harry Potter as much as she can.” With that, Andromeda tossed a pinch of floo powder and disappeared back to her office.

---(Scene Break)---

Priscilla Lestrange-Greengrass and her daughter Daphne Greengrass were both seated in the garden, when they heard a soft knock on the garden door. “Enter”, Priscilla called, and the door opened ushering in the small and slender figure of Berenice Rookwood-Rosier – a Charms and Runes mistress of exceptional talent. She was followed by her son, Sakarbal Rosier, a medium sized boy of Daphne's age with midnight black eyes and a frosty manner. Priscilla and Daphne greeted the duo demurely, before Priscilla conjured two chairs with a wave of her wand. Berenice smiled at her old friend, and conjured up a few sandwiches, before settling down in the chair. “So, Prissie, finished shopping?”

“Of course! Glad that that bit of annoyance is out of the way”, returned Priscilla. She continued, rather proudly, “Happily, though, Daphne got a maple and chimaera fur wand, specialised for healing.”

Berenice laughed, "Congratulations, Daphne. It appears that your mother's blood predominates." Daphne muttered a bashful thanks, as Berenice continued thoughtfully, "It seems our children are following in our footsteps, Prissie, rather than their fathers'. Yesterday, Sakarbal got a wand of cypress and sphinx hair – excellent for charms and runes. But trifles apart – how was your meeting with Harry Potter."

"Most illuminating", returned Priscilla. "The boy went wild buying books in Flourish and Blotts, and has the curiosity of a cat. He was particularly interested in books on Defence against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms and Potions. He asked Emmanuel, Amelia, Minerva and me for our opinions on what books would be useful for a fresher at Hogwarts, and ended up buying all the books we suggested. If he actually reads what he has bought, he will be, at least, a very knowledgeable wizard. But he is also a likely a very powerful wizard. He ended up buying the Dark Lord's brother wand at Ollivander's." The two Rosiers gaped at Priscilla in astonishment. "Have you been considering my idea, Niki?", questioned Priscilla.

Berenice nodded, "It is an excellent one – classes over holidays for all kids who show enough talent. If Harry shows enough talent, and enough interest, we could really start doing some good work in our free time."

Daphne Greengrass and Sakarbal Rosier had both been too well trained to question their parents in the middle of a conversation, but the looks on their faces asked what they would not voice. Priscilla turned to the two first years, and spoke seriously, "Listen, carefully, you two – this is very important. You both have been trained seriously at home, and have interesting talents yourselves. You should not find any difficulty with your syllabus in your first year at Hogwarts. I want you both to keep your eyes open for any talented kids at Hogwarts. We want to find and train any talented children."

"What kinds of talents?", questioned Daphne immediately.

"Oh – things like Empathy, Healing, or proficiency in a particular type of magic. Maybe even ability to talk to particular types of animals, or ability to sense the needs of plants."

“Okay”, answered Sakarbal slowly. “But why now?”

Priscilla and Berenice exchanged a quick glance before Berenice answered, “I am going to tell you both something which I want you to keep your mouths shut about. For many years now, research in magical Britain has been faltering. Each year's Hogwarts graduates are one bit worse than the previous year's. Standards are falling everywhere. Many highly-skilled jobs are unfilled because there is no one of the requisite skill available. Most of the problems of the lack of research can be traced back to Hogwarts, which is not only not really encouraging people to think, but also becoming a personal political base of Albus Dumbledore. Too many – both staff and students - are finding their creativity stifled. Apart from McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout, none of the other teachers are up to scratch. We cannot allow this decline to go unchecked. Priscilla got this idea of taking the promising kids and training them properly in the basics during the various so that they might be encouraged to go for research as a career option. That is why we want you to start looking for talented children in your year.”

Rosier nodded, before inquiring, “Why only our year?”

“We are starting this as an experiment. We would train you two anyway. Let's start small – if it works out, we can expand to other years. Besides, it is important to start right at the first year. They need to get their basics right.”

“Does daddy know of this”, asked Daphne.

“Of course”, returned Priscilla. “Niki's husband is also willing to help. Between the four of us, we have all the important subjects and quite a few talents covered. Even if we are not capable of some talents, we do have enough ability to help the children realise their potential. I can also ask Regulus and Rabastan to help, if it becomes necessary.”

Rosier had one final question, “Why Potter?”

“Potter showed promise yesterday – he seems interested, and determined. Secondly, he is an important icon in the wizarding world and having him in our class can make it easier to persuade others to come over. Finally, the boy has a number of enemies. He needs to learn magic fast, and will require the extra training. It would be cruel to leave him to fend for himself with no training.”

“So we need Harry Potter to save us from ourselves?”, remarked Sakarbal cynically.

“That would be an excellent way to put it. I want you both to keep close to him and help him in any way you can. See what he is talented in and if he is promising enough, offer him extra lessons over the holidays”, came the cool voice of Berenice.

---(Scene Break)---

“So what have you learnt about the Boy-Who-Lived, Quirinius?”, asked the high, cold voice.

“Several things, my Lord”, came Quirrell's obsequious voice. “Firstly, his muggle relatives that Dumbledore has left him with mistreat him badly. Potter has no love for muggles, or for muggle-born.”

“Most interesting, Quirinius. Does the boy have any ideas why he survived my curse?”

“No, my Lord. He did not even know he was a wizard until last night. He knows precious little of his parents, and certainly does not remember how they died, or how he survived.”

Lord Voldemort was completely silent for a long moment, contemplating exactly what this meant for his plans. Finally, he asked, “What else have you learnt?”

“For one thing, someone – most likely Dumbledore – has been intercepting and withholding his letters from the wizarding world. Secondly, his torment with the muggles has given him a bad case of poor confidence in himself and a low self esteem. However, he seems very willing to work hard and do whatever it takes to achieve

enough power and skill to protect himself. He also seems to have a bit of loyalty for his friends. Finally, he bought a wand that is the brother of your own.”

The Dark Lord was processing the information swiftly in his mind. He could see the pattern – a young orphan boy bullied by all the others, growing up unaware of his heritage but deep down a very powerful wizard, hating and hated by muggles who could not understand the abilities, a similar wand ... It was almost a leaf taken out of his own childhood.

“What did you tell him, Quirinius?”

“I told him that he might be a target for many in the wizarding world, my Lord, including your former followers. I bought him a couple of books on Defence against the Dark Arts – the first book being a very basic theory of curses and counter-curses, and the second containing stuff like what one should do when confronted by hostile wizards, proper exercises for becoming good at Defence against the Dark Arts and duelling stances, and such like.”

“Quirinius, I want you to start teaching the boy Defence against the Dark Arts thoroughly when he comes to Hogwarts. Don't be impatient, however – and don't try to push too far too fast. Once he has seen the power that can be wielded by wizards, he may be much more amenable to our views.”

“That will be difficult, my Lord. Dumbledore is tracking him actively at all times. If he comes down to my office too often, or to any other place in the castle, it will be suspicious.”

Here Quirrell expected a rush of anger from his master. To his surprise, Voldemort almost chuckled. “Don't worry, Quirinius. I know just the places in the castle.”

---(Scene Break)---

“Cissy, what do you think of our Mr. Potter?”, demanded Lucius, a smile evident in his tone.

Narcissa did not reply at once – she seemed lost in thought. Lucius continued, “The old fool could not have done us a better favour. The boy does seem to hate muggles and mudbloods. He has respect for purity of blood.”

“I would not be so sure, Lucy”, answered Narcissa finally.

“Cissy – the boy almost seemed to be repulsed by the muggles Minerva had brought. He hated them and their spawn. No, Dumbledore has done us a great service.”

Narcissa shook her head unconvinced. “Lucy, did you notice anything amiss about the boy's clothes?”

“It seemed some kind of muggle clothing.”

“Not only that – they were transfigured into that form – probably by Minerva. Now why would anyone want to transfigure his clothing into muggle clothing?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I can think of two reasons”, continued Narcissa, disregarding her husband's interruption. “First, Minerva transfigured his clothing to prevent him from being recognised in Diagon Alley. But if she did that, she would also have changed his appearance to hide his characteristic scar. No, I am sure that was not the reason why his clothing was transfigured.”

“And what do you think was the reason?”

“His clothing had to be made presentable. You saw how he kept shying away from the muggles. The muggles Dumbledore left Potter with probably torture him – routinely. He was most reticent when speaking of his muggles – I could hear his raw fear when he spoke of them. His clothing was some kind of rags they had given. Minerva made them look decent.”

“You think Dumbledore would allow muggles to torture his golden child?”

“Lucius – what exactly do we know of Dumbledore's plan for the boy?”

Lucius thought for a moment and spoke, “He has gone to enormous lengths to get full custody of Potter. No one can meet or speak to Potter without Dumbledore's permission. The boy figures prominently in his plans. I assumed Dumbledore was keen to retain Potter for the trophy value, and probably to ensure the boy remains true to the Light, but now ...”

“Exactly. Instead of giving the boy at least a half decent life, Dumbledore has allowed the muggles to torture, and humiliate the boy. This could mean several things. He wants to turn the boy into a Dark Wizard, and then destroy him, making himself a hero once again. Or it could mean that he wants the boy cowed and ignorant, making him easy to fit into whatever role Dumbledore has in mind. Or it could be that Dumbledore put him with the muggles and they torture the boy without the old man's knowledge ...”

“What does it matter, Cissy? The boy hates muggles and mudbloods. He will fit nicely into our plans.”

Narcissa shook her head, “No, Lucy. The boy fears and probably hates muggles. However, I am afraid he has too much sympathy for mudbloods. In them, he sees too much of himself – children born in unfortunate circumstances and to the wrong people. He will probably befriend mudbloods, and try to help them.”

Lucius had opened his mouth to contest her views furiously, but his arguments seemed to evaporate before Narcissa's cool logic. He looked thoughtfully at his wife, “What do you think we should do?”

“First, show that the wizarding world, especially the purebloods care about his well-being. To do that, we need to get someone – preferably not traceable to us – to speak to the Daily Prophet about Harry's travails, preferably uncovering his story in small bits over a period of time. We need to destroy Dumbledore's image and what better way than uncovering a new horror about Potter every few days. Then, when the wizarding world erupts in anger about the treatment

given to the icon, we can write to Harry, offer our sympathies and befriend him. We need to get him to trust us before we start giving him our views. As of now, he is going to be suspicious about everyone in the wizarding world. No one in the wizarding world cared about him when he was being tortured. He has no reason to trust us. We need to win his confidence. Until then, it would be inadvisable for Draco to be disparaging towards mudbloods in his presence.”

Lucius nodded, “That's an excellent idea, Cissy. I'll warn Draco and get someone at the Ministry to speak to Rita Skeeter.”

---(End of the Chapter)---

## The Roaring Snake – 4

(Author's Note: One of my reviewers (rune 1806 – thanks, Rune!) made a very profound remark about making Dumbledore not 1D but 3D. I tend to agree with him/her. In this chapter, I am trying to bring Dumbledore to life. He is, in my opinion, a superb adapter and manipulator. He will play the game with the grace and aplomb of a master. Hopefully, this will satisfy the manipulative!Dumbledore fans.

Another reviewer (sweetgirl23 – thanks, Sweetgirl!) made an interesting comment about Cissy's plans of getting to Harry. Only problem is – Cissy knows nothing – she is merely guessing – educated guesswork, perhaps, but nevertheless, guesswork. Dumbledore will be on the lookout against such plans and you will see both sides going at it hammer and tongs.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

## The Invitation from the Weasleys

Dumbledore was no fool, and the moment Hagrid had told him that Minerva had brought various important people in the magical world not completely under Dumbledore's thumb to meet Harry, the headmaster had known that his plan of keeping the icon of the wizarding world totally ignorant had failed. Total control over Harry was now gone – he had, at the very least, made acquaintances with two very worrisome people – Amelia Bones and Priscilla Lestrange-Greengrass. To allow Harry to fall into the hands of any one of the two would be fatal to Dumbledore's plans. They both had their own agenda, none of which suited Dumbledore – or his plans for the Potter boy. No – he would take advantage of the situation and feed Harry exactly what Dumbledore wanted him to know and think. Finally, when he heard that Lucius and Narcissa had met Potter and quizzed him about his childhood, he knew that trouble was brewing in the horizon. He would have to act fast if he had to save the situation.

His preparations made, he apparated to Privet Drive. His knock on the door of the Dursley residence was answered by a cameloid human, with an face of an equine. 'Strange', reflected Dumbledore, 'that pretty Lily should have inherited all the beauty in the family,

leaving her sister with the pitiful bits that had been scraped from the bottom of the barrel'. Aloud, he spoke cheerfully, "Mrs. Dursley, I was hoping that we could speak about Mr. Potter."

Now Petunia might have hated magic, but she held wizards in a healthy terror. She hissed, "Get in, quick! Someone might see you."

Dumbledore slipped inside and then made his way to the sitting room. He smiled at Petunia, "A very nice home you have, Petunia. May we have Harry with us, please?"

"What do you want to talk to the fre – er – boy about?"

Dumbledore had not missed the slip of Petunia, but apparently took no notice of it. He merely smiled genially, "Oh – he has to start learning about magic soon."

Petunia whispered furiously, "Keep your voice down and don't mention his abnormality here. Neighbours might be listening."

Dumbledore beamed, "Not to worry, Petunia." In a smooth move, he drew his wand and waved it. "There – now – that problem is solved. I have placed a strong silencing charm on this room. Nothing we say will be audible outside. Don't worry – the charm will be lifted once I leave the house."

Petunia looked ready to foam at the mouth. "Put it away", she snarled. "There will be no freakishness in this house, if you please."

Dumbledore sighed theatrically, "Very well, Petunia. As I was explaining before you interrupted me, there is a month before Harry comes to Hogwarts. In that time, people – from our world – have invited him to spend his time with them. His parents were popular in our world, and many of them still retain a great deal of gratitude to Lily and James."

"You wish to take him away?"

"Precisely."

“When will he return?”

“During the Christmas and Easter holidays, if he prefers. If not, he will come back only next summer.”

“Keep him at the school at Christmas and Easter, if possible during summer as well. Send him only when you must.”

“As you wish. Can you please get Harry now?”

---(Scene Break)---

Harry had been pulling weeds in the backyard when Petunia appeared at the back door. She called Harry in, asked him to clean up and meet the headmaster of his new school. Harry, who had heard much about Dumbledore, appeared quickly. He saw an old man with a long beard and kindly expression. For all that, there was an aura of power and confidence about the Headmaster. On the other hand, seeing the small and skinny frame of Harry, Dumbledore frowned for a moment. He had put Harry with the muggles in the hope that they would despise and humiliate Harry, leaving him with little self-confidence and in a state where he would be easy to manipulate, not physically abuse and torture him. Surely Petunia had not descended to such depths that she would abuse her own kin? However, he dissembled his feelings and smiled at Harry, “Harry, my boy, it is very good to see you again.”

“I'm sorry, sir, but I don't remember meeting you.”

“Perhaps not, Harry – you were only a small child when I last saw you.”

“How can I help you, sir”, stuttered Harry, plainly awed by the old man's aura. Dumbledore, however, was wont to do everything at his own pace. Deciding to give Harry a small show of his power, he smiled, drew his wand and waved it, conjuring a tea tray, and some sandwiches. He offered, “Sit down, Harry. Tea?”

Harry nodded dumbly, and Dumbledore poured a cup of tea for Harry, and Petunia before taking one himself. Petunia refused with thin-

lipped contempt, and Dumbledore vanished it with a disappointed sigh. Once the boy was comfortable, he began with his beatific smile, "Well, Harry, Hagrid told me that you had obtained your supplies in Diagon Alley today. I trust you found the magical world interesting?"

"Oh! Yes, sir."

"Hagrid also told me that you were interested in History." Dumbledore reached into his robes and took out a book – it was a book about the war with Grindelwald – one which painted Dumbledore in an infallible light. He held it out to Harry, "Happy birthday, Harry. This is your birthday present."

Harry gulped, "Thank you, sir", as he accepted the present.

Dumbledore continued, "Harry, I hear that you met some of the best people of the wizarding world, today."

Harry assented, absently noting that the old man was very well informed where Harry was concerned, as Dumbledore nodded, giving Harry the impression that Hagrid and Prof. McGonagall had followed his orders in giving Harry some insight into the magical world. The headmaster continued, "It is very generous of Hagrid and Minerva that you were introduced to the finest of the magical world. Well, Harry, you need to become much more acquainted with our world. In the interests of your – social education – many families have volunteered to show you the important aspects of our world. Would you like to see more of the magical world, Harry?"

Harry nearly jumped with joy at the offer. A chance to learn more – he would never turn it down, given the expectations the said world had of him. However, he also found it more than a little suspicious. For ten years, he had been ignorant of the existence of the world, and now everyone and his grandmother was crawling out of the woodwork, taking an interest in his well-being. Unbidden, Minerva's words floated to the fore in his mind – her warning that everyone would try to manipulate him. He would accept what he could get from those taking an interest in him, but would also keep his eyes open.

Aloud he spoke, "How'll I see more of the magical world, Professor?"

“Harry, a family has invited you to spend the next month with them. They are a very old, very nice and very gentle family. As such, you might want to visit them and learn more about the wizarding customs, magic and the magical world.”

“Who's inviting me, Headmaster? The Bones? Or the Goldsteins?”

Dumbledore frowned inwardly – surely Harry could not have managed to get so close to the Bones or the Goldstein family? Hoping that it was just Harry mentioning the few families he knew by name, Dumbledore answered serenely, “No, no, my dear boy – it is not they who have invited you. It is the Weasleys.”

Dumbledore had chosen the one family that was utterly loyal to him. He had other lackeys, of course, but none more devoted than the Weasleys. They would drill into Harry's mind unquestioning obedience of Dumbledore. There were two other advantages to putting Harry with the Weasleys. The first was that the Weasleys were utterly lax when it came to wizarding customs and etiquette. It was one of the reasons why they were shunned by all the other old purebloods. If he could get Harry to become close to the Weasleys, it would make the Boy-Who-Lived anathema to the pureblood crowd. Dumbledore would not have to worry about that lot getting their claws on Harry. The second reason was that the Weasleys had their own prejudices about the four Houses. Just as the Malfoys considered getting sorted into Gryffindor or Hufflepuff an unacceptable shame, the Weasleys had determined that anyone not getting into Gryffindor must be defective in some way. If they could infuse Harry with the feeling, manipulating him over the coming years would be so much simpler. The only downside he could see was that it would make keeping Harry and Minerva apart a little more difficult, but Dumbledore could take care of that – if necessary, removing Minerva from the position of the Gryffindor's Head of House and replacing her with Janetta Vector. There were other benefits to putting Harry with the Weasleys as well, but those were too much into the future to worry about now.

Harry was instantly suspicious. He never had heard of the name of the Weasleys. If indeed they had been interested in his well-being

and magical education, what had prevented them from inviting him in the past? However, it would not do to have Dumbledore angry with him, so he quietly asked, "Why now, Professor?"

Dumbledore sighed sadly, "I have no doubt they would have been glad to invite you ere now. Alas, Harry, you may know that there were many of Voldemort's followers hunting you down after the fall of their master. Your mother invoked an ancient blood ritual that protected you as long as you lived with people of her blood. Your aunt is the only one of her blood alive. Consequently, you had to be with her until you reached the age of eleven."

"Oh!", Harry seemed disappointed – whether it was because he had had to stay with his aunt and uncle or whether it was because Dumbledore and others had not made other efforts for his protections, the headmaster could not say. Harry then remembered Amelia Bones injunction that he should stay with his uncle and aunt while she investigated his missing post. He mentioned as much to Professor Dumbledore. Dumbledore waved it aside, "Don't worry about it, Harry. I'll take care of it."

"Will I be able to get letters now, sir?"

Dumbledore thought for a moment. He would not completely remove the letter-ward round Harry. But he would give Harry letters from the Ministry and his friends – at least, those that did not contain any political agenda of their parents. He beamed, "Of course, Harry. You are in serious danger – people might send you curses and dangerous plants or animals in a bid to assassinate you. Will you promise me that you'll open your letters with an adult witch or wizard around you – in case what you have received is something dangerous?" As Harry would be either with the Weasleys, or Hogwarts most of the time, he would have one of his lackeys able to keep an eye on Harry's reactions to his letters.

Harry nodded in consent. "Excellent, then", beamed Dumbledore. "I can give you a few minutes to pack, Harry. Please get ready."

---(Scene Break)---

Harry had been brought to the Weasleys by the old headmaster, who introduced him to the group of people. First, he introduced Mr. Arthur Weasley, a tall, balding man who worked in the Ministry of Magic and Mrs. Molly Weasley, a plump woman with a kindly face. The children included a rather prim person, Percy – a Gryffindor prefect, twins Fred and George, a tall boy with a goofy grin named Ron – starting in Harry's year, and finally, a girl named Ginny Weasley, a small redhead who could not speak two words coherently in Harry's presence.

The next week with the Weasleys was the most pleasant week of Harry's existence – at least the most pleasant week that he could remember. He had written to Justin, Susan, and Anthony and had received nice and courteous replies from them all. Mrs. Weasley was a kind woman and concentrated on feeding Harry. Harry still helped out with the chores, but he did so voluntarily. The Weasleys showed Harry many wonderful things about magic and Mr. Weasley and Percy told Harry many things about the Ministry, something which definitely interested Harry. Ron was nice enough to hang around with, and the twins made Harry laugh, something Harry had done rarely before coming to the Weasleys. All in all, for the first time in his life, Harry felt wanted and liked.

There were a few things that nagged at Harry's mind, though. The first was that he had not heard from Amelia Bones or Minerva McGonagall about why he had not been receiving his post during his stay with the Dursleys. He wondered why they had not communicated with him, but put it down to either incomplete investigations or busy schedule of the two witches. Second and more importantly, Harry had been raised with a strong work ethic – his uncle and aunt's cruel discipline had paid off in that regard. Harry saw each job as something that must be done to the best of the ability. Harry was also intensely curious and thirsty for knowledge – he spent much time reading the books he had bought. He had offered them to Ron as well, but the gangling Weasley boy would rather play chess and exploding snap rather than read a book. None of the Weasleys, with the exception of Percy to an extent, had shared Harry's traits or outlook. They were self-contained, self-absorbed and completely content with their lot in life. Years later, Harry would reflect that they embodied the state of complete somnolence of the wizarding world – content with

their lot, self satisfied, and unwilling to work for progress. Ron may be a good friend, but he would be completely apathetic when it came to pushing himself to the limit and beyond. Harry, on the other hand, had huge expectations to live up to; he needed people who would push and inspire him to greater heights, not people who urged him to while away his time.

Finally, there was Mr. Weasley's obsession with protecting muggles. For the life of him, Harry could not see what was so great about muggles, nor why they deserved protection. They were conceited, narrow minded and mostly cruel - at least, they had been so to Harry. Why they should not reap what they sowed escaped Harry. All of Harry's feelings became academic, when on the first day of the second week with the Weasleys that all chaos broke loose in the form of a Daily Prophet article.

## Boy-Who-Lived Kept Ignorant and Abused by his Guardians?

By

Rita Skeeter

The Magical World is probably going to be in for a shock as the Boy-Who-Lived finally makes his appearance in Hogwarts this year. It is well acknowledged that we have had high hopes from the last living representative of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter. The House of Potter, which has rendered yeoman service to the Ministry in the last three centuries, particularly in the last war against You-Know-Who, and is honoured above most of the other Most Ancient and Noble families would be horrified to find Harry Potter's state. This reporter has learnt from reliable sources that Mr. Harry Potter, who appeared last week in the Diagon Alley to purchase his Hogwarts supplies, was clothed in an assortment of ill-fitting clothing and rags, and accompanied by the wild and dangerous gamekeeper of Hogwarts, Hagrid. What was the reason for this strange appearance? Is Mr. Potter so wild and reckless? Or is he abused by his muggle guardians, who do not even provide him proper clothing. Fortunately, however, Prof. Minerva McGonagall, Transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts, was also at hand in Diagon Alley and she made Mr. Potter's attire presentable.

Mr. Potter also appeared completely bewildered for the tumultuous response the Wizarding World gave him, and knew no reason why he should be considered a celebrity. Does Mr. Potter not know his own history. Is he ignorant of why he is regarded highly in our world? Is he unaware of, or indifferent to his heritage and responsibilities in the Magical World?

Finally, what were his guardians, both muggle, and magical, doing if they have failed to inculcate the sense of responsibility in Mr. Potter? From sources inside the Ministry, this reporter has learnt that, ten years ago, the Ministry handed over complete guardianship of the Boy-Who-Lived to Albus Dumbledore, in the face of strong opposition from various kith and kin of Mr. Potter and the horror of the more conservative of our society, to keep Mr. Potter safe and help him grow into a responsible young man. Dumbledore, on obtaining control of Mr. Potter, promptly put him in the care of muggles – his relatives on his mother's side – who have not had any relations, commercial or social, with our world in the last twenty years. The august headmaster of Hogwarts also forbade all witches and wizards from having any contact with Mr. Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived, has likewise, not made a single visit to any witch or wizard in the last ten years, and has been completely inaccessible. How could Albus Dumbledore have been so completely insensitive and indifferent to the Boy-Who-Lived? Dumbledore's magical prowess may rival that of Merlin, but his common sense seems on par with that of a village idiot! Albus Dumbledore owes us all an explanation for the upbringing of Mr. Potter and an answer for whether Harry Potter's muggle guardians torture him. In the meantime, we at the Daily Prophet can only hope that Mr. Potter soon manages to adapt to our society quickly and grows up into a responsible young man who can shoulder the burdens that will inevitably be thrust on him.

Mr. Weasley, who read the article first, had his mouth open. Swiftly, he made his way into the kitchen and handed the paper to Molly, pointing to the article in question. Mrs. Weasley's reaction was similar to that of her husband. She whispered, "What should we do?"

"I think we should talk to Dumbledore first. After getting his opinion, we can think of our response."

Just as the two Weasleys had finished their discussion, two more people had put down the day's Daily Prophet with sinister relish. The first was Narcissa Black-Malfoy, who murmured, "Now, Albus, we shall see who can play these games better."

The second was Albus Dumbledore, who smiled coldly and almost cruelly, "Now, Lucius, let us see how you like when your games go awry."

---(End of the Chapter)---

## Roaring Snake – 5

(Author's Note: I note that I am taking a little too much time (and expending too many words) before Harry gets to Hogwarts and he can begin acting on his own, in the company of his friends. However, this prelude is required to set the stage for Harry's independence – at least in mind and thinking ability. He will not be a 'Dumbledore's Man'.

However, this chapter is the last of the pre-Hogwarts ones. Harry will board the Hogwarts express in the next. This chapter is necessary to demonstrate to Harry just how much he is becoming a pawn in various hands, and how little the high and the mighty of the wizarding world care about his feelings.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

### Actions and Reactions

Arthur Weasley tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fire, and called, "Dumbledore's office!". Putting his head in the fire, he saw the old man sitting calmly in his chair, reading the day's Daily Prophet. A visibly flustered Arthur Weasley indicated the Daily Prophet in the Headmaster's hand as he questioned, "Albus, have you seen the today's article about Harry Potter?"

"Indeed, I have, Arthur. But there is nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry?!!", echoed Arthur Weasley incredulously. "Albus, I won't be surprised if the entire magical Britain erupts in fury over what is being alleged."

"Don't concern yourself about the reactions in the magical world, Arthur. Harry's visit to your home has been kept quiet. Leave it to me to handle the Daily Prophet and the public opinion."

"But are they true, Albus? Do those muggles torture him?"

Dumbledore all but rolled his eyes. "You know better than to take Rita Skeeter seriously. She takes more than a little artistic licence with her articles."

That was true enough, but the nagging doubt would not leave Mr. Weasley – he had seen for himself the state of Harry's clothes and his meagre possessions. And Dumbledore had not answered his question at all – he had merely evaded it. However, there was no use questioning Dumbledore further – the old man would not give any meaningful replies. He nodded slowly, “Okay, but shouldn't we do something about this article?”

“Arthur”, interrupted the older man kindly. “All has been arranged. Today, it is the birthday of Roderick MacMillan's son. He has invited your family and Harry Potter to attend it.”

Mr. Weasley had always reckoned the old headmaster something mad, but this went beyond all limits. What had the MacMillan birthday to do with the allegations of torture surrounding Harry Potter? He cut in, “Headmaster, please! What does Roderick's son's birthday have to do with Harry or the article?”

“Everything, Arthur. Go there today evening. You will see all for yourself.”

---(Scene Break)---

Harry Potter had just finished reading up the day's Daily Prophet – the article concerning his life story had not escaped him. To say that he was shocked would be a classic understatement. Questions rapidly swirled through his mind, and it bothered him that he had no answer to any of the questions at all. Who had tipped off the Daily Prophet about his appearance? How had they guessed that his home life had been unpleasant, to say the least? How did they know about his ignorance of the Magical world? Even worse, Harry could confide in no adult. He so wanted someone he could trust, someone who would have his interests in mind when they answered his queries, but there was no one he could trust. He sighed inwardly – things may have been much simpler when he was with the Dursleys. However, he had not much time to ruminate over the article, as Molly Weasley called him down to breakfast.

Breakfast was a tense affair, with both the adult Weasleys and Harry being very nervous about the article. Neither of the two adult Weasleys, nor Harry had referred to it, and the younger ones had not yet read the newspaper. After breakfast, Arthur Weasley flooed to his work, while Molly sent her sons out into the garden on some chores and gestured to Harry to follow her. She took him into the kitchen, and began, "Harry, dear, there is an article in the Daily Prophet today ..."

"I know, Mrs. Weasley", sighed Harry. "I read it."

"The nerve of the woman! How dare she accuse you and Albus!", ranted Molly, before calming down and continuing, putting her hand on Harry's shoulder, "Don't be upset, dear. Rita Skeeter never makes anyone look good. No one believes the rubbish she writes."

At this, Harry felt torn. On one hand, he did not want to become a piteous spectacle, giving unpleasant details about his home life away. On the other hand, he did not like giving a false impression that everything was hunky dory at the Dursleys. He contented himself with shrugging indifferently, "It doesn't matter, Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley suggested tentatively, "Harry, child, for the next few days, be careful with your post. Though most people won't believe Rita, a few may. Someone who has read the article might send you dangerous things. Will you please open it in the presence of an adult wizard or witch?"

Harry really did not like others prying into his letters, but there was nothing to be done for the moment and he still retained the decorum of decency as a guest of the Weasleys. He nodded in assent.

"Very well", continued Mrs. Weasley, breathing much easier, now that the unpleasant part of the conversation was over. "This evening, Harry dear, we have all been invited to the birthday party of Roderick MacMillan's son. I hope you will come with us."

"Who?", queried Harry.

“Roderick MacMillan's son, dear. His name's Ernie and he'll be starting at Hogwarts this year. He's invited all of us, and you especially this evening.”

“Mrs. Weasley, who're they and why'd they invite me?”

“The MacMillans were old friends of your father. They heard that you had returned to the Magical world, and wanted to make your acquaintance.”

While Harry was less than impressed with all these 'friends' of his parents who, after ignoring him for a decade, were now crawling out of the woodwork by the score, he had more pressing concerns. Harry had been invited to a wizarding family, and he was painfully conscious of the complete inadequacy of his own upbringing in teaching him the etiquette of the wizarding world. He could probably expect them to cut him some slack, but that would only go so far. He had been diligent about the task suggested by Prof. McGonagall – paying attention to the culture and decorum of the wizarding world, and in the last week, he had read a bit of the basic propriety expected of him on various occasions. Of course, he was still a very long way from affecting the unflappable calm that seemed to flow so easily from a Daphne Greengrass, or the simple courtesy of a Susan Bones, far less the sophisticated charm of a Narcissa Malfoy. However, he had learnt enough in the past week that, with a bit of caution, should keep from making any gross mistakes or outright improprieties. Another matter nagged at his mind – the Dursleys had never taken him anywhere, and consequently, he had only the hand-me-downs from Dudley. He had no clothes that he could wear to a social gathering hosting important people. He hinted as much to Mrs. Weasley. She was more than a little shocked – this episode did indeed seem to give credence to Rita Skeeter's theory. Dissembling her concerns, however, she smiled, “Not to worry, dear. We'll take care of it.”

---(Scene Break)---

Harry was having a very enjoyable evening at the MacMillans. For the first time in his life – at least the first time he could remember – he was wearing new clothes. The ocean blue robe that Mrs. Weasley

had got him really was most becoming and Harry was the centre of attention in the party, even though it was Ernie's birthday. His hosts were an old and rich pureblood family that was celebrating the birthday of their youngest representative in style. He had been introduced to a blond, and stout boy of his age – Ernie – and found him pleasant company. There were a couple of friends and cousins of Ernie MacMillan and all in all, it was a very pleasant evening. The MacMillans were interested in Harry's life with muggles, while Harry found the novelties of the Magical world equally entrancing. The party had gone on smoothly and pleasantly, when a pockmarked and silver haired elderly man, introducing himself as Elphias Doge, Ernie MacMillan's maternal grandfather, cornered Harry. He smiled, "I take it you are enjoying yourself, Harry?"

Harry nodded, a questioning look in his eyes, as the older man continued, looking down kindly at the boy, "It's been more than ten years since I last saw you. Your parents would be proud of the young man you have become. How have you been?"

"I've been staying with the Weasleys, Mr. Doge. They've been very kind to me."

"Ahhh – the Weasleys", repeated Doge with a distant expression, as though he were savouring an old memory. "Are the twins still terrors?"

Harry smiled, a genuine smile, "They play more pranks in a day than I've in my life."

"Good", the elderly wizard beamed down at Harry. "I'm glad that you're not letting the lies the Daily Prophet printed worry you." Although he made that a statement, the look in his eyes were asking Harry a question. Harry sighed, "Why can't they leave me alone? Why should they pry into my life like this?"

The older man laughed slightly, "Harry, you are a very famous person, and famous people are always newsworthy. If you cough, they'll print about a nasty cold bothering the famous Harry Potter."

Harry turned scarlet, but he was also resentful, and upset about the whole state of affairs. Getting the hint, Elphias Doge immediately

changed the topic of conversation. They talked a bit about Harry's parents and touched more on Harry's more pleasant moments in life, especially his primary school, rather than dig into his unpleasant home life. Harry was pleased with the older man – here was someone who, rather than either offer sympathy or commiseration over his state of affairs, was actively trying to get Harry to focus on the more pleasant moments of his life. Finally, the party came to an end, Harry, the MacMillans and Elphias had a picture of them taken and Harry returned to the burrow with the Weasleys.

It was the next day that Harry would find out the reasons for Mr. Doge getting Harry to relive his happier moments for him. Betimes, next morning, he was downstairs and picked up his copy of the day's Daily Prophet. Skimming through it idly, Harry's attention was immediately riveted by another article regarding him. While it was not quite front page news the previous one had been, it contained the picture of Harry, the MacMillans and Elphias Doge in an inner leaf. Beneath it was the fateful article:

Boy Who Lived Slandered and Misrepresented?

By

Elphias Doge

Yesterday, the Daily Prophet had reported that the Boy-Who-Lived may be mistreated by his muggle guardians. Knowing both Albus Dumbledore, and Lily Potter personally, this author was loath to believe that either the Headmaster of Hogwarts or the family of Lily Potter would be cruel to the saviour of the wizarding world. Deciding to verify the allegations about Mr. Potter's situation, I sought and easily managed to meet Mr. Potter.

Seeking his reactions to the article, this author met Mr. Potter at the home of Lord Roderick MacMillan, who was celebrating the birthday of his son, Ernie with the friends of the lad. Mr. Potter's well-wishers will be pleased to know that he is perfectly healthy and happy, and that all his needs are being met very well. At the party, Mr Potter, dressed in ocean blue robes (see picture above), was the model of propriety, grace and etiquette, putting to rest all speculation that he is

untrained in the ways of the Wizarding world. His charming manners certainly won the respect of his hosts, and Lord MacMillan remarked to me later that he had rarely seen such a well mannered and polite boy. He was even gracious enough to stand with the MacMillans and me for a photograph.

Mr. Potter expressed his serious displeasure about the Daily Prophet reporting rumour and hearsay, confirming that the author of the previous article never approached him for an interview, choosing instead to rely on second hand information and rumour. He also refuted allegations of an unhappy home life, and insinuations about his unfamiliarity with the Magical World. Indeed, he went so far as to relate to me a number of his happy memories during the last ten years. Judging from Mr. Potter's behaviour, this author can testify that Mr. Potter's knowledge of our ways is no idle boast, and that he has been remarkably well trained. Mr. Potter, who is currently staying with unnamed friends in our world, said that he understood the need for secrecy where he was concerned, and expressed a deep desire that the august newspaper respect his privacy. I can only hope that the both the Daily Prophet and the author of the article casting aspersions on the ability and politeness of Mr. Potter and his guardians are gracious enough to apologise to them.

Harry's mind had gone numb, as he crumpled the paper in his fist. White hot fury erupted inside him as he realised how the conversation with Elphias Doge had been used, and how he had become a tool in the hands of the various people in the Magical World? How could the old man have done this to him – and that without even having the courtesy of informing what he was doing? Why couldn't the infernal busybodies leave him alone?

His anger, however, was replaced by an almost insensate suspicion, bordering on paranoia, of everyone in the Magical world? Was all that kindness and sympathy of the MacMillans false? Was it all done merely that the previous article in the Daily Prophet could be refuted? But why? What had they to gain or lose from the previous article? Harry wondered bitterly how many of the others, apart from the MacMillans had ulterior motives. He had met several people in the wizarding world who had been kind and helpful – Mr. Goldstein, Prof. McGonagall, Prof. Quirrell, Mme. Bones, the Malfoys, and so many

others, not to mention the Weasleys. But how many of them had his welfare in mind, and for how many was he a pawn on their chessboards? Unbidden, Minerva's words came to the fore in his mind, 'You need to be careful, child. People will try to control you, to manipulate you. You need to understand the wizarding world very well. Even those who are not your enemies and mean you no harm have their own goals as far as you are concerned.' Yes, that was true enough – but he needed an adult figure he could trust to tell him the truth, and he lacked one. Books would only get him so far, and in any case, books had authors who manifested their own prejudices. The other muggle-born students were probably unbiased as far as he was concerned, but they were much in the same state as he was and knew precious little about the Magical world. He would have to verify everything everyone told him. There was no taking anything for granted.

Harry leant back in his chair, and sighed wearily. He needed desperately to find out the people who were behind these manipulations and what their goals were, but there was no way of detecting it – or was there? He thought of cloistering himself away, but that would probably never work – he was an icon, and icons were never left alone. His experiences told him that much – he would always be the centre of attention. Then, a thoughtful frown flittered across his face. If he could not have one single adult who would tell him the truth always, he would have to enlarge his circle of 'friends'. He would hear things from a lot of people, and Harry's experience with falsehood told him that its success depended on lack of knowledge of the intended target. By increasing his inflow of information from the present small bunch to a large group, he would be able to improve his powers of corroborating the information people fed him. It was inconceivable that all of them were in league with each other and would lie on the same points. By finding out the lies and tracing it to their authors, Harry was reasonably confident that he would be able to figure out what their agendas were.

That resolution made, Harry decided to write to Justin, Draco, Ernie, Daphne, Susan and Anthony about the various questions he had been having in his studies, besides soliciting the help of the Weasleys. Over the previous week, he had started reading up the various books on history and culture suggested by his professors and those who

had met him in Diagon Alley on his birthday, and he had come across a number of points where he found himself in doubt. By penning his doubts in his studies to the various people, he would get answers from the different people, and the various answers would make it easy – easier than it was currently – to verify. He mopped his brow. Life was never easy.

---(Scene Break)---

Arthur Weasley and his wife had just read the article, and Arthur had been rather horrified seeing how he had been used in the game of Dumbledore. That the crafty Headmaster had engineered this particular article, Mr. Weasley had not the shadow of a doubt. He remarked to his wife, "Molly, are we doing the best we can for Harry?"

"What do you mean, Arthur?"

Arthur narrated his previous day's experience with Dumbledore. However, Molly was supportive of the Headmaster's actions. "Arthur, we'd to put an end to Rita's lies. Dumbledore's arranged that – I, for one, am glad he did."

"But Molly ... ", began Arthur.

"Arthur, Albus knows what he is doing. I'm sure he had good reasons for putting Harry with those muggles. Besides, you know that woman – she never makes anyone look good."

All that was true, but the vague feeling of becoming a mindless pawn on a chessboard, did not leave Arthur Weasley. He would try to watch out for Harry's welfare, as much as he could.

---(Scene Break)---

Albus Dumbledore smiled, popping a lemon drop into his mouth, as he read the article by Elphias Doge. It was fortunate that Hagrid had noticed and mentioned Narcissa quizzing Harry about his history with the muggles. From the moment he had learnt about Narcissa's interest in Harry's home life, he had been able to surmise the Malfoys' plan to 'liberate' him from the Headmaster's clutches, and to disgrace

the great Albus Dumbledore publicly. Therefore, he had acted fast and put Harry with the one family he could trust to follow his agenda for the Boy-Who-Lived, the Weasleys. From then on, it was only an eventuality before someone wrote about Harry's unhappy life in the muggle world. For Dumbledore, it could not have come at a better time than just before the birthday of young MacMillan. He had sent Elphias Doge to meet up with the boy – whose invitation to the party, the Headmaster had arranged – and had him scotch those rumours before they could gain widespread credence. With the picture of a happy and healthy Harry Potter with the MacMillans in the Daily Prophet, it would be more than enough to quash the credibility of Rita Skeeter's article. Getting the Daily Prophet to print the Elphias' article had been a trivially easy matter. He had suggested to Fudge that it would not make the Minister look good either if it came out that the Ministry had been indifferent to the needs of Harry Potter and the Minister had fallen over himself to .. persuade the editor of the newspaper to publish Elphias Doge's article, which the man had done with alacrity. The old man hoped that the Malfoys would abandon this plan, at least for a while. If not they would find that the wily Headmaster had other strings to his bow. He had invested too much in Harry Potter to concede him to the others.

---(Scene Break)---

Narcissa had just finished breakfast when Lucius first broached the most recent article. "Looks like your plan didn't work all that well", he remarked coolly.

Narcissa did not bat an eyelid. She spoke almost indifferently, "Did anyone know about the plan to write about Harry's life story?"

Lucius was instantly defensive, "My contact in the Ministry would never have betrayed me to Dumbledore."

Narcissa nodded. "It must have been Minerva or the oaf, Hagrid, then. They probably reported to the old man my interest in Potter's relationship with the muggles." She stretched out her feet.

"What now?", questioned Lucius.

“Until Potter turns up at Hogwarts, there's nothing we can do. We can't meet him, nor send him a letter, so we'll have no proof about our claims. Just suggest to Rita that she should do a bit more digging around Harry Potter, in particular, try to get an interview with him. It should be manageable once he comes over to Hogwarts. In the meantime, I'll tell Draco to get on Potter's good side and persuade him to give Rita an audience.”

Lucius looked thoughtful, “Could you be wrong about Potter's muggles?”

“I am certain that I am not”, returned Narcissa, quiet assurance lacing in her voice. Seeing Lucius' expression, she continued in a rather steely voice, “Lucius, getting Potter out from under the old man's thumb is not remotely easy. Don't expect the easy victories of the Wizengamot here. We are facing the most formidable force in our world – Albus Dumbledore.”

Lucius nodded, and the couple separated.

---(End of the Chapter)---

## The Roaring Snake – 6

(Author's Note: In this chapter, we will see some more of the manipulations of Dumbledore. It struck me as strange that in a train full of people, when everyone knew Harry Potter (remember Draco's remark) was on the train, that no one would come to try and speak to him (with the exception of Neville, Draco, and Hermione towards the end of the ride). Given the reaction in Diagon Alley – and later in Hogwarts, where everyone was pointing to him during his first days – is it not completely uncharacteristic that no one tried to have a glimpse of the Boy-Who-Lived?. Here is my attempt to explain the whole episode.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

### Letters and the Hogwarts Express

Having made his decisions about how he was going to deal with the wizarding world, Harry seated himself at the hall table, and began penning letters to Daphne, Susan, Anthony, Draco, Ernie, and Justin about his questions – the only piece of information he omitted was letting others know where he was staying. Mr. Weasley had asked him to keep this bit under wraps as it might be difficult to provide him security, if it became known where he was staying. He was just about finished with the task when Ron turned up. Seeing the bunch of letters that Harry had already written, he exclaimed, “Merlin, mate! Who're you writing to?”

Harry smiled quietly, “A few friends.”

Ron had, in the meantime, mannerlessly taken up one of the letters – by ill luck, it was the one Harry had addressed to Draco. For a moment, a mixture of rage, betrayal, disbelief and stupefaction were stamped on the face of the youngest Weasley male precluding coherent speech, as his hands balled themselves into fists. “You .. you”, he spluttered.

Harry was more than a little aghast at the over-the-top reaction of Ron, “What's it, Ron?”

“We’re not good enough for the Boy-Who-Lived, are we? Had to hook up with that rich bastard, didn’t you?”, Ron snapped waspishly.

Harry was completely dumbfounded. “What’re you talking about?”

“This!”, snarled Ron, pushing the letter to Draco in front of Harry’s eyes. “What’re you writing to the enemy for?”

Harry was more than a little defensive now – all he had done was write a courteous letter thanking the Malfoys for the party and ask a few things about pureblood etiquette and customs, and here was this redhead snarling and spitting like a sun maddened dog. Harry did not rage – indeed, it was almost as if his study and practice of pureblood tradition was paying off now, which impressed upon him the need to keep his temper at all times, since it was unbecoming of a member of a Noble and Ancient House to lose his temper in public. Instead, both his face and voice turned icy, as he remarked, “Since you have already started reading the letter, you might as well read the rest and see.”

Ron reddened a little as he realised what he had done; however, his curiosity and anger won out over any remaining qualms over reading another person’s letter. Finishing it, he looked up at Harry, “What’s this party you’re thanking them for?”

Harry had an urge to tell the Weasley to mind his own business, but once more his lessons about not giving away his thoughts came to his rescue; this was a good opportunity to extract a bit of information – why did Ron hate the Malfoys? He briefly explained about the day he had gone shopping in Diagon Alley, and the Malfoys arriving to celebrate his birthday. “I just wanted to thank them for it”, he finished.

Ron looked slightly less angry, but there was a great amount still lingering. He answered, “Harry, mate, you’ve got to avoid them. Maybe you didn’t know, but the Malfoys were strong supporters of You-Know-Who. They’ll turn you into a stinking dark wizard like them.”

“Ron, come on! This is just decency to thank them for a party.”

Ron turned away, disgusted with the Potter who would write a Malfoy. At the door, he turned and snapped cruelly, "Remember, you're thanking the people who murdered your parents!" With that Parthian shot, he was gone.

The shot hit home. Harry went pale with anger and mortification. Had the Malfoys had a hand in the death of Harry's parents? But they had seemed so friendly. Harry sighed in frustration – Ron's words had touched a nerve. Was he really writing his parents' murderers? And how did Ron know about the Malfoys anyway? He was most likely repeating what his parents had told him. Harry needed an independent source that he could use to verify claims. He ran to the book on various pureblood families in Britain that Narcissa had given him and swiftly looked up the Malfoys. It contained a glowing account of them, emphasising their noble lineage, and the various services they had rendered the Ministry during the course of history. The book told him of the various important people of the Malfoy clan, but there was not much information about Lucius Malfoy – which was not surprising, considering that the book had been written over twenty years ago, and Lucius would just be finishing his studies at Hogwarts at the time. Harry ran a hand through his hair – so many questions and no answers. Slowly, but firmly, he put away the letter to Malfoy. He would need to find out more than he knew, before he 'consorted' with the Malfoys. He would not write or associate with his parents' murderers.

The last three weeks before the beginning of Hogwarts was one of the best and most productive times Harry had ever had in his life. He spent most of his time reading quietly by himself, when he was not helping with chores in the Weasley household, or playing quidditch with the Weasley kids. Harry was a natural at flying and he really excelled at it – the older Weasleys thought he would make the quidditch team in any house he got into. Ron had tried to interest him in various games and Quidditch lore, but Harry had no interest in all this – while he enjoyed flying, he had no interest in the history of quidditch, nor of the various Leagues. While the Weasleys kids and Harry did not exactly end up great friends, he was on tolerably good terms with the kids.

He had received prompt replies from all his classmates he had written, with the exception of Anthony Goldstein, who had written back to say he would be going on a vacation over the next two weeks and would catch him on the school train. Susan and Daphne had both been extremely helpful, and included various references and extra material from other sources in their letters, and Harry was very grateful for their help. Harry had had just one letter from Prof. McGonagall, when she had answered his transfiguration queries, and none at all from Mme. Bones, but Susan had hinted that her aunt had found an answer and she would share it with him at Hogwarts.

One thing nagged at Harry's mind – he still had found little information about the Malfoys and their involvement with Voldemort. The more he thought of the Malfoys, the more lousy he felt. They had gone out of their way to throw a party for him – the first decent birthday he could remember – and here he was, being churlish and ungrateful, not even thanking them for it. And there was Draco – no matter what Lucius and his wife were guilty of in regard to Voldemort, Draco was blameless where the Dark Lord was concerned. Harry made up his mind to seek out Draco in school and find out for himself the kind of person the Malfoy boy was.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry had packed everything for the next day and was brimming with excitement. Finally, he would be off to Hogwarts and he was going to learn what he had been dying to find out. Harry remembered that he had been given an envelope that contained his instructions for reaching the school train, along with the ticket. He ripped open the little package, and found, to his horror, just the ticket – there were no instructions whatsoever in them. Worried, he called to the Weasley sitting across the room, playing chess with his sister, “Ron, how do we get on the train tomorrow?”

“We leave from Platform Nine and Three Quarters”, answered Ron, without taking his eyes off the board.

“Yes”, Harry nodded. “But I doubt there is a Platform Nine and Three Quarters in a muggle railway station.”

"We have to walk through the barrier separating platforms nine and ten", returned Ginny.

"How d'you know that?", queried Harry, astonished that a girl who had never been to Hogwarts would know this piece of information.

Ron all but rolled his eyes, "We've been there before."

Harry did not say anything, but the lack of instructions, which McGonagall had said would be in the envelope she had handed him, baulked him. He chalked it up to one more of the things he would ask her when he met her.

---(Scene Break)---

The next day dawned bright and clear, and Harry was in wonderful spirits. He was looking forward to Hogwarts, and to meeting his classmates again; so he was in a very good mood. The preparations complete, they travelled to King's Cross and entered Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Harry had arranged to meet with Susan, Daphne, Anthony and Justin on the platform, and they were all awaiting him when he reached it. He introduced Ron to the others and Daphne introduced a new boy – or, more accurately, a cold eyed, dark haired boy whom Harry had not seen before as Sakarbal Rosier. They quickly got into a compartment, waved goodbye to their kith and kin on the platform and the train sped northwards.

Harry, Daphne, Susan, Anthony, and Sakarbal swiftly fell into a deep conversation about some of the nuances of transfiguration, charms and potions, while Justin was being regaled by Ron about Quidditch and its rules. The initial part of the journey was uneventful; no one disturbed Harry and his colleagues, and the Boy-Who-Lived had a very pleasant journey discussing the various subjects he had been studying intensely over the past few weeks. His companions, driven, motivated and assiduous as himself, were a joy to discuss the material with, and time flew swiftly before Harry realised. Harry made a couple of attempts to include Justin and Ron in the discussion, but neither of them paid the slightest attention to the serious discussion the more studious and diligent of their kind were involved in. Harry recked little of it – he was going to work on his subjects seriously, and

if Ron or anyone else was uninterested, it was none of his business. They all bought a little food off the trolley, had a light lunch and continued with their discussions.

It was getting dusk and the light was just fading when the first interruption occurred. Sakarbal Rosier was explaining some delicate theory behind levitation charms when the door banged open without warning. Draco Malfoy, with two gorilla sized followers, burst into the compartment. Rosier was less than amused at being cut off in mid speech, and his voice was brittle as cracking glass as he inquired, "We're discussing serious stuff here. Why do you interrupt?"

Malfoy took no notice of him. Instead, he surveyed the group and his eyes lighted on Potter. "There you are, Potter. I wondered why you never wrote me over the last month."

Ere Harry could answer, Ron broke in, "He knows better than to speak to stinking dark wizards, Malfoy." Harry's head snapped round at Ron, shocked at the hatred emanating from the redhead, while Malfoy sneered, "Ahhh – another Weasel. I wonder how many there are in that rabbit hole they live in. I suppose you think Potter will choose to be around riffraff like you?" Ron's ears went pink, as he snarled back, "He's been staying with us for the last month. He knows whom he can trust – and it's not slimy snakes like you.", he finished smugly. Not only Draco, who looked completely flabbergasted, but several others looked in surprise at Harry at this bit of information. Only Susan nodded quietly to herself, as if it confirmed something she had been suspecting.

To say that Harry was aghast at the loathing in Ron's face, and the cold sneer of Malfoy, would be a total understatement. He saw clearly what was coming – these two would fight over him like two hyenas over a piece of carrion. They would ask him to choose between the two arch-rivals. Harry was not ready to do that yet – he needed time and information before he made his choices. He nudged Susan to move a bit and make space for Malfoy and his two cronies, as he cut in before the blond could react, "Draco – sit down, please. We're all friends here; so please stop fighting over me. By the way, Malfoy, you've not introduced your two companions."

Both Malfoy and Ron were fuming; the former because Harry had referred to the pathetic Weasel as a friend, and the latter because Harry had invited the arch-enemy, a slimy, stinking Malfoy, into the compartment, overriding Ron's concerns. However, both of them were cognisant of the tasks set before them – it would not do to fight Harry over this matter. Malfoy dissembled, and his habitual sneer relaxed slightly as he subsided into the seat between Susan Bones and Sakarbal Rosier, gesturing to his two companions to find seats likewise. He answered, “Oh – this is Crabbe”, he nodded towards the taller anthropoid, “and that's Goyle”, he gestured to the shorter gorilla. Ron gave Harry a look of utter betrayal, but Harry signalled to him not to intervene, and that he would explain later. The redhead gave Malfoy a look of total disdain, before turning to Justin to continue his conversation. Harry sighed in relief as the atmosphere relaxed slightly and explained, “We were discussing the theory behind levitation charms, Draco. Care to share your thoughts?”

Draco couldn't care less about silly theories – he was a Malfoy and he only bothered with practical spell-casting. The stupid theories could go hang as far as he was concerned. He opened his mouth to answer, when there was another knock on the door. Malfoy called, “Enter.”

A bushy haired girl with rather large front teeth entered the compartment, followed by a chubby, chestnut haired boy. “Have you seen Neville's toad?”, she demanded in a bossy voice.

“When did you see the toad last?”, asked Justin.

“I can't remember exactly – he was with me when I got on the train”, returned the toadless boy miserably.

“What were you doing all this time, then?”, sneered Malfoy. “You've got wonderful timing – we get down in half an hour, and you want to search for your toad now!”

Neville flushed scarlet, and mumbled about trying to get into the compartment before. Harry immediately pounced on it, “You tried to get into the compartment before? We didn't see you.”

“I tried to come in twice, but every time I got near, I remembered I'd forgotten something important”, muttered the embarrassed Neville. Justin, and Ron laughed, but Malfoy had stiffened. Harry stared in stupefaction – this kid was making no sense. What the deuce did he mean, and why was Malfoy reacting strangely? “Is there something you'd like to tell us, Draco?”

“No”, snapped Malfoy.

“I think Malfoy went through the same experience before he graced us with his presence”, came the mild, grave voice of Sakarbal.

“You're imagining things, Rosier”, returned Malfoy curtly.

“I wonder”, returned Rosier thoughtfully. By now, Susan, Anthony and Daphne were following the cold eyed boy's line of thoughts, and Susan cut in, “Neville, you said you tried to come in here twice. Do you remember when?”

“The first time was an hour ago. The second time was about half an hour ago.”

“I'm guessing the first time you approached, the feeling you'd forgotten something was overwhelming. The second time, it was less intense.”, conjectured Anthony.

“How d'you know that?”, asked the astonished Harry.

“It's not hard to guess”, shrugged Anthony. “It is the basic effect a repelling ward would have. The question is – who warded this compartment, and why?”

The bushy haired girl, who had been watching this exchange with fascination, cut in, “A repelling ward? Like the ones Hogwarts has? I read about them in Hogwarts: A History.”

“Something similar”, nodded Anthony.

“I doubt any student could do it”, answered Sakarbal frowning.

"And how could anyone know we'd choose this compartment beforehand? We didn't know it ourselves! And why isn't it affecting us as well?", commented Harry.

Anthony returned, "If the compartment were warded after we chose it, it wouldn't affect those already inside. None of us have left it after King's Cross. Since no one knew where we'd sit, I'd guess it is something one of us has that is causing this warding effect – I doubt it is the compartment itself that's been warded."

"This is a very advanced spell", remarked Rosier pensively. "You'd need a charms and runes master to carry it out correctly. Also, note the degradation over time. Did you feel anything this time, Neville?"

Neville shook his head, as he watched in fascination the debate. "Then, I'd say that this effect is based on a spell that activated at a particular time. It slowly degrades over the next six hours or so."

Harry, practical as ever, nipped this speculation in the bud. He had a strange feeling that this warding had something to do with him. Time enough to worry about it later – there were more pressing concerns for the moment. "We'll worry about the ward later", he broke in. "We need to find Neville's toad first. Describe him, please, Neville."

The plump boy gave a quick description of the toad. Harry nodded, "Where have you looked for him?"

"The first five compartments", answered the bushy haired girl.

"Fine. There are thirty compartments in this train, and if you have searched the first five, we should split up the rest amongst us. Draco, you, Crabbe, and Goyle can look in the last five compartments. Justin, Susan, Tony – you look in the five before prior to the ones Draco's looking in. Daphne, Sakarbal – the central five. Ron and I'll look in the five before Daphne's. Neville, you and your friend can look in the first five. If any of you find him, come and tell the rest of us. We'll assemble once the toad's found or twenty minutes from now. If we haven't found him by then, it's unlikely we'll find him at all."

Neville muttered with genuine gratitude, "Thanks."

Everyone hastened to obey – it seemed that Harry Potter had a way of command with him, and seemed to slip into leadership roles easily. He was practical, he could prioritise tasks easily, and he had the greatest acceptability. Even Ron and Malfoy had obeyed his commands without murmur.

---(Scene Break)---

Fifteen minutes later, the toad had been discovered hiding beneath a seat by Susan's group and the search parties reassembled in the old compartment. Even as they were getting back, a disembodied voice announced that they would reach Hogsmeade station in ten minutes, and that all students should get ready to disembark.

Hearing the announcement, Harry smiled at Neville and his companion, "Okay, I guess we should all start getting ready." He looked at the girl, "By the way, I'm Harry Potter. I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Hermione Granger. Are you Harry Potter – really?", breathed out the girl. "I know all about you, of course. I've read about your story in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, and Modern Magical History."

"Granger?", inquired Draco. "I thought I knew most families of the wizarding world, and I've never heard of Grangers."

"Of course, you wouldn't have. They are dentists."

"Ah – muggles!" It was amazing how much disdain Draco had managed to put into a single word. Hermione looked uncertainly at Draco wrinkling his nose at her, when Harry cut in diplomatically, "I saw what the Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts has to say about me. We'll meet at school, and maybe we can discuss what Modern Magical History has to say about me." He gave the girl a hopeful look.

Hermione returned a winning smile, "Sure. See you later." She dashed away, dragging Neville behind her.

As the girl left, Harry smiled – a smile tinged with mild self-mockery and bitterness, as he muttered to himself, “The girl thinks she knows all about me – I wish I could say the same. I wish I knew all about myself.”

---(End of the Chapter)---

(Author's Note: Try to guess how the compartment had been warded. It will be explained in the next chapter.)

## The Roaring Snake – 7

### The Sorting

(Author's Note: The sorting has always been a hotly contested topic in fan fiction. Everywhere, it is Harry pleading with the Hat for a particular house (or to avoid a particular house). I am going to avoid this and take a different approach. Harry has a particular logic worked out about where he wants to go and why he wants to go there. Any comments on Harry's logic are welcome. Harry's choice will have interesting ramifications in his relations with others.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

---(Beginning of the Chapter)---

Harry descended the train accompanied by his colleagues and a booming voice hailed him and his classmates, "Firs' years, o'er here." Harry recognised the bearded face of the giant Hagrid and smiled. "Alright there, Harry?" queried the gentle giant. Harry nodded, and Hagrid herded them down to the edge of a lake, and ordered them into the boats, four to a boat. Harry had been sharing a boat with Ron, Draco and Susan, while Justin, Tony, Sakarbal and Daphne had taken another. Harry was conscious of the simmering tension between the redhead and the blond, and tried to make small talk to relax the atmosphere. However, he was spectacularly unsuccessful and the Malfoy and the Weasley continued giving each other death glares. Finally, giving it up as a hopeless task, Harry turned his attention to Susan and they began to speak of inconsequential matters, leaving the Malfoy and the Weasley in play the Medusas.

They got their first view of the Hogwarts castle as the boats approached a curtain of ivy and Harry had to confess that the descriptions he had read in various books of the edifice scarcely did the barest amount of justice to the magnificent structure. The horizon – or what was visible of it – was taken up by the colossal castle and the glimmering lights in the various rooms gave the dark stone an unearthly halo. Soon, they were traversing a dark tunnel, which ended up in an underground harbour. Harry disembarked with the others, and followed Hagrid to a large door, which opened to unveil

the stern figure of Prof. McGonagall. As she was leading everyone inside, Susan whispered, "Harry, fall back behind the others. I have something to tell you."

Harry looked in surprise, but obediently allowed the other first years to overtake him into the Great Hall. As the others moved ahead, Susan murmured, "Auntie asked me to give you some information about your letters. When she tried to investigate your circumstances, she was told by the Headmaster that her probe was unnecessary. She thinks Dumbledore knows what is happening to your letters."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, but did not seem surprised. He had surmised as much given Dumbledore's warning about his correspondence. Susan continued, "Auntie said she is sorry, but there is not much she can do except insist that Ministry correspondence be handed over to you. As for the rest, Dumbledore has full rights to insist that she not pry into what is a 'family matter'.

This was indeed news to Harry. While Harry had no illusions about Dumbledore's interference, he was surprised to learn of the extent of the control the old man had over Harry's personal life. He questioned Susan quietly, "How does Dumbledore have so much control?"

Susan looked in astonishment as she answered, "Surely you knew that Dumbledore is your guardian in the magical world? This means that he is fully entitled to control your movements and restrict all contact with you."

Harry digested this bit of information with a scowling face – the meddlesome old coot was certainly playing his cards close to his chest. Why had he not told Harry about this aspect of their relationship? Susan continued, "Harry, I am sorry, but auntie says that there isn't much she can do about this."

Harry had regained control over his emotions, and he muttered to her, "Thank her for me, will you? I dare not write to her – it is likely my outgoing post is also under watch. Thank her and tell her I am grateful for her attempt."

Susan nodded, and as Harry followed her into the Great Hall, he murmured to her, "You chose a strange place to give me the news."

She smiled, "Everyone's now worried about the Sorting and no one's paying us any attention. This's the ideal time to share news without others noticing."

Harry returned her smile, his approval at the good psychology she was employing evident in his expression. Unfortunately for Harry and Susan, while they were right about other people in Hogwarts, the same did not apply to other entities that dwelt therein.

---(Scene Break)---

Professor McGonagall had placed a stool in the Great Hall and the Sorting Hat on top of it. The Hat sang a song about the virtues of the various Houses<sup>1</sup>, and the way in which it would sort the students, and then Prof. McGonagall began calling out the names in alphabetical order. Harry, having read about the Sorting, was watching keenly where all his friends would be sorted. Hannah Abbott, the girl he had briefly met in Diagon Alley, was the first to be called and she was sorted into Hufflepuff. Susan Bones followed suit and she gave him a cheery wave from her seat at the second table from the right. The next, Terry Boot, went to Ravenclaw, then the other girl he had met in Diagon Alley, Mandy Brocklehurst, also went into Ravenclaw, and a certain Lavender Brown was sorted into Gryffindor. A well built, muscular girl named Millicent Bulstrode was sorted into Slytherin. Harry tuned the process out, allowing his mind to wander about in its own world, waiting until acquaintances of his made their way under the Sorting Hat. Absently, he noted that one of Malfoy's gorillas – Crabbe – was sorted into Slytherin. He returned to Hogwarts mentally when Prof. McGonagall called Justin Finch-Fletchley. Harry eagerly watched as the dark haired boy briskly strode to the stool. The hat seemed to take some time, before it screamed, "HUFFLEPUFF". The next few in line engaged Harry's attention as well. The first of them was Anthony Goldstein – the hat had barely settled over his brow when it shouted, "RAVENCLAW". Next, Hermione Granger was called. She ran eagerly to the stool and jammed the hat on her head. "GRYFFINDOR!", yelled the hat, after a bit of hesitation. Next in line was Daphne Greengrass. "SLYTHERIN", the hat announced.

Harry observed amusedly that his acquaintances were being scattered all over the school. This was all to the good – his plan was getting an unexpected boost. He watched as McGonagall made her way over the Hs and the Js. Neville Longbottom – the toad loser – went into Gryffindor. Soon after that came Malfoy's turn, and he was understandably sorted into Slytherin. They were approaching P and Harry began to get nervous, though he had an idea all worked out. First, a pug faced girl named Parkinson was called and sorted into Slytherin. Then a pair of twin girls, Patil, were sorted into Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, and then a Perks was sorted into Hufflepuff. Finally, “Potter, Harry!” There was hubbub at this, and many were craning their necks to have a glimpse of the famous Harry Potter, after they had mysteriously missed him during the train journey from King's Cross.

Harry walked forward firmly, and put on the hat, crossing his fingers, praying that his scheme would work. A voice sounded in his mind, enumerating his qualities before wondering where it should put him. This was Harry's cue to interrupt the Hat – he thought firmly, “Hufflepuff!”

“Hufflepuff, eh?”, sounded the voice. “You've definitely got loyalty and a hard working nature, but ...”

“Hufflepuff, or not at all!”, he thought again firmly – this was a dangerous gamble from Harry, but he had an inkling that the Hat would not call his bluff and boot out the 'saviour of the Wizarding World'.

“Why do you want to go in Hufflepuff?”, muttered the voice.

“Look, already everyone's got sky high expectations from me. I want a bit of peace and quiet and Hufflepuff's the best place for me.” Harry did not voice all his thoughts, but the Hat was not deceived, “And the fact that you want everyone to underestimate you, eh? You want them to think you're not all that bright? Quite a Slytherin idea, that! Well, since you've got quite a few of the necessary qualities, if you're sure, you can go to - HUFFLEPUFF!”

The second table from the right was cheering wildly, and Harry Potter was getting the heartiest welcome from all his house mates. Sighing in relief, Harry quickly shot a glance round, gauging the expressions – McGonagall looked slightly disappointed, but not at all surprised. Dumbledore had manifested no expression save that benign smile of his. Susan Bones, Ernie MacMillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley were all absolutely thrilled that Harry was sharing their House. Granger, Rosier, Greengrass, and Goldstein were applauding his Sorting politely. However, it was the faces of Malfoy and Weasley that were most illuminating to Harry. The former was sneering at Potter in cold contempt, while the latter was looking down his long nose in distaste and self superiority. Harry nodded quietly, put down the hat on the stool and walked to his House table, seating himself next to Susan Bones. She giggled, “Knew you had it in you to be a 'Puff”, while Finch-Fletchley murmured, “Welcome, mate!”

He laughed quietly, “I'd to convince the Hat to put me in 'Puff. He muttered in an undertone, “This is the safest place in the school.”

Susan looked astonished, but gratified that he had wanted to be in 'Puff, but ere she could question him, Harry shushed her, pointing to the Sorting of Sakarbal Rosier. The hat took a bit of time before putting the latter in Ravenclaw. Rosier put down the Hat and walked away thoughtfully, before sitting down next to Anthony Goldstein.

There were very few left now – Lisa Turpin was sorted into Ravenclaw, Ron Weasley into Gryffindor, and finally, Blaise Zabini was put into Slytherin. With that, McGonagall put away both the stool and the Hat and Dumbledore rose giving a short speech indicating the permissible and impermissible in Hogwarts, interspersed with some meaningless phrases and words. During this speech, Harry surveyed the Staff Table calmly. A dumpy woman with grey hair was beaming at him proudly – he absently reflected that this must be the Head of Hufflepuff. Minerva McGonagall met his eyes and gave him a small smile and a nod. Quirrell and a dwarf were deep in conversation. A hook nosed, greasy haired, overgrown bat of a man was staring down at Harry with an expression of vindicated malevolence. Harry muttered to Susan, “Who's the hook nosed teacher?”

“Snape”, she whispered back. “He's head of Slytherin. He handles Potions.”

“And the grey haired professor opposite us?”

“That's Sprout. She's our head of House – teaches Herbology.”

“And anyone who does not wish to die a horrible death will avoid the eastern corridor on the third floor”, finished Dumbledore.

Harry stared at the man astounded. Surely the man had not taken leave of his senses to have something at Hogwarts that endangered the lives of his students? He filed away the information for future use, and being hungry, turned his attention to the food that had appeared magically on their plates. The feast was excellent and ones Harry and the others had eaten their fill, they were shepherded into the Hufflepuff Common Room by a pale girl with a heart shaped face, who introduced herself to Harry Potter as Tonks – she was the head girl, and promised him any help she could give him. They chatted amiably for a few minutes before she suggested that he get some sleep, with the classes beginning the next day.

Harry retired to his dorm, changed into sleeping clothes, and sitting down on the bed, considered the day's events. All in all, Harry had reason to be pleased with the events. He had had his way and entered Hufflepuff, the most innocuous and inoffensive of the four Houses in Hogwarts. He had managed to get on decent terms with elements from all the four different Houses – this was fate's assistance to his plans. If he could maintain the good relationship, he would have a constant source of information from the entire school. Soon, Harry promised himself – soon he would begin disentangling the web of lies, schemes and deceipts that surrounded him constantly. He would lay bare the agendas of the different people and he would choose his allies after he had discovered for himself the sterling quality of the people that surrounded him. Harry's face relaxed into a contented smile as he stretched out on the soft bed and soon he was enjoying the soothing embrace of Morpheus on the four poster bed in the first years dorms.

---(Scene Break)---

"Hagrid, are you sure you saw Malfoy descend from Harry's compartment?"

"Yes, Professor", answered Hagrid. "Harry was with the Malfoy kid, along with Bones, Goldstein, Greengrass, Rosier and Weasley and two more. I saw 'em all get down."

Dumbledore restrained an oath with difficulty. How could Molly Weasley have allowed his plans to go so awry? She knew the importance of guarding Harry for the 'Light' until he was completely under their influence. It was one thing to allow Harry to exchange a letter or two with Bones, Goldstein and Greengrass, but quite another to let them 'bond' and become friends. Molly had been asked to ensure that Harry met no one on the platform except the Weasleys. Once on the train, Dumbledore's spell on the ticket would ensure that no one except those who had met him on the platform prior to boarding the train would be able to enter the compartment with Harry Potter. Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley would be able to enjoy each other's company without interruption, and once at Hogwarts, Dumbledore would find means to ensure against Harry making undesirable acquaintances and friends. But something had gone utterly wrong and Harry had shared a compartment with several people whose parents caused Dumbledore no end of woes – Malfoy, Rosier, Greengrass, and Bones. While the Goldsteins were more neutral, they were not under Dumbledore's control either and that was always bad medicine for the wily Headmaster's plans.

With a sigh, he dismissed Hagrid and resolved to speak with the Weasley boy to find out what had occurred, when the portrait of Armando Dippet interrupted him, "Albus, I think you should know that the Potter boy knows you are his magical guardian."

Another shock. Dumbledore looked in dismay at the portrait, before composing his features into his characteristic benign smile, "Tell me how it occurred, Armando."

"The Bones girl was speaking to Potter just before the Sorting. She told him that Amelia had tried to investigate Potter's missing

correspondence, but had been restrained from doing so – by you, in your capacity as Potter's guardian.”

“And Harry? How did he take it?”

“He did not say anything except ask Bones to thank her aunt for her efforts.”

Damnation! Albus would have preferred Harry angry or upset – it would be easier to deal with a hurt or irate Harry, rather than this cool acceptance or circumspection of his. He needed Harry to look up to the Headmaster and trust him implicitly, and here everything was going wrong. He picked up the Sorting Hat and questioned without preamble, “Why did you place Potter in Hufflepuff?”

“Because he belonged there”, returned the Hat in a snide voice.

“That might be sufficient for others, but not for me. As Headmaster, I need to know why you put Potter in Hufflepuff, in order to be able to protect him.”

“I am afraid I cannot tell you, Albus”, remarked the Hat in a superior voice. “Even if I would, I cannot give away students' secrets without their permission. You must know this.”

Dumbledore knew then that no amount of cajolery or threats could coerce the annoying piece of haberdashery to change its mind and open its mouth – or what passed for them. Merlin Blighted Potters! They never ceased causing the old man problems. From the time of Harry's grandfather, Charlus Potter and his wife Dorea Black-Potter, they had been thorns in Dumbledore's bed of roses – and Harry was proving no exception. Bad as everything had been for the Chief Warlock, one good thing had come through though – Harry was in Hufflepuff and not Slytherin, as he had feared when he had heard of the Malfoy sponsored birthday party in Diagon Alley. It was not Gryffindor, but in one way, it was good that Harry was not in Gryffindor. Dumbledore suspected that Minerva would have been uncooperative if Harry's interests clashed with Dumbledore's plans. Dumbledore relaxed slightly, and considered the situation. There was only one person in Hufflepuff in Harry's year that could be considered

a threat to Dumbledore's plans for Harry – Susan Bones. Amelia Bones' interference could prove fatal for the Headmaster's plans for Harry Potter, both for the future and for the what he had in mind for the boy for the current year. No, Dumbledore decided, he would need to find ways to break up the relationship between the Potter and the Bones girl. The Headmaster had his creatures in Harry's year in Hufflepuff, and he would ensure that no others got close to his pawn. He had schemed and invested too much in Harry's ignorance and malleability to concede his advantage. Harry would be what Dumbledore wanted, when he wanted. No one was going to take away the Headmaster's ace now!

---(Scene Break)---

“Quirinius, you have gone mad!”, burst the high cold voice of Lord Voldemort angrily.

“Alas, my Lord, I am certain of my facts.”

“Hufflepuff! It is impossible that one bearing a wand as powerful as mine should end up in the House of fools!”

“Impossible or not, it is so, my Lord!”

Lord Voldemort did not doubt the truth of what Quirrell was saying. Could Potter – a wizard powerful enough to wield the Dark Lord's brother wand - be so laid back and stupid? Was he even worth the attention and consideration of Lord Voldemort? However, the Dark Lord remembered the consequences of his previous underestimation of Potter. Even now, he was suffering from them. No, he would watch Potter for any signs of talent and ambition, and then decide. “Quirinius, there is to be no change in our plans in all essentials. However, you will watch the boy for signs of talent and ability first. You will train the boy, if he is capable.”

“As you command, my Lord”.

“Good. You will keep me informed of your progress with the boy.”

---(Scene Break)---

While Voldemort and Dumbledore were plotting to gain control of Harry Potter, two letters were being dispatched. Susan Bones had written to her aunt, Amelia,

Dear Auntie,

I arrived safely at Hogwarts and am fine. I was sorted into Hufflepuff – not a surprise, is it? I have one bit of news though – Harry Potter is also in Hufflepuff. I told him about your efforts, and he asked me to thank you, as he doesn't dare write to you himself.

Let me know how you are,

All my love,

Susan

The second letter was from Daphne Greengrass to her parents.

Dear Mum and Dad,

I am safe in Hogwarts and was sorted into Slytherin, same as you both. Sak was sorted into Ravenclaw though – that was a bit of disappointment. However, Teddy Nott is in my House, as are Malfoy, and Parkinson. Snape came over after the Sorting to give us all a talk. He spoke about how other Houses dislike us and emphasised that we should hang together for our own sakes.

Surprisingly, Harry Potter was sorted into Hufflepuff. I don't know what this portends, but I fancy there is more to his Sorting than meets the eye. He looked at all of us strangely after he was Sorted. I will keep close to him and make him our offer, if he is capable and interested.

How are you both? Give my love to auntie Niki and uncle Ham. Write soon. I miss you.

Love,

Daphne

---(End of the Chapter)---

I am not inclined to regurgitate JKR's material, nor write a new poem for what is a totally incidental occurrence. You may assume that the Sorting Hat sang the same song as in PS.

## The Roaring Snake – 8

### The First Week

(Author's Note: Enter Millicent in this chapter. Usually, fan fiction authors take a romantic route to introducing new characters, especially potential love interests (usually, it is Harry saving them from trouble, and/or worse). In this story, I will take a different path to introducing Millicent to Harry – a more prosaic one and ironical one. I think I should clarify one thing, given some of the remarks on the Darklordpotter website – when I wrote this would be a Harry/Millicent pairing, it involves only friendship in the PS timeline. I have a few ideas about how Harry's relationship with Millie will be different and more solid compared to Harry's relationship with Daphne, Hermione and Susan (you notice some differences already in this chapter) and I aim to build on them. I will be developing this further in this and other stories (I have plans for the AU of CoS and PoA as well), but in the present story, there will be no romance. I am not minded to write about a pair of eleven year old kids linked romantically.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Disclaimer: JKR created world and characters belong to her. I am just playing in her domain.

---(Beginning of the Chapter)---

The meeting of the Heads of the four Houses and the headmaster prior to the beginning of the term was a momentous one. Minerva, Filius and Pomona had joined Dumbledore and Snape already deep in conversation. When they had assembled, the eccentric Headmaster had announced that the school would be playing host to the Philosopher's Stone, and that their assistance would be necessary in guarding the object. To say that the Heads of Houses were all appalled and horrified would be a gross understatement. Or at least, Minerva, Filius and Pomona were aghast at Albus Dumbledore's latest escapade. Snape simply looked sour and bitter as ever – he had made no comment at all. Minerva voiced the concern and stupefaction of her colleagues, "The Philosopher's

Stone!”, she ejaculated incredulously, looking at Dumbledore as if he had finally snapped.

“Now, now, Minerva”, responded Dumbledore soothingly. “Surely, you know Hogwarts is the safest place in this country?”

While Minerva did not doubt the strength or security of Hogwarts, she did not find the need to test its potency against the myriad of dark wizards and criminals who would make a beeline for the castle when it became known that the Philosopher’s Stone was hidden there. She answered, “But, Albus, we are not a Gringotts vault to hide valuables!”

“Ah, but the Gringotts vault has already proven inadequate to ensure the safety of the Stone!”. He briefly told his senior staff about the attempt on the Stone in the Gringotts. “We are a school”, he asserted gravely, looking at the sceptical expression of McGonagall, “but also a bastion of Light since our inception. If Voldemort …”, he continued, ignoring the shudders and flinches of the others, “if Voldemort is attempting to gain the Stone, then it is our duty to ensure its protection.”

Minerva sighed. She found it hard to argue against this logic. However, she had one final objection, “What happens when it becomes known that we are hiding the Stone?”

“It must not become known!”, emphasised Dumbledore. “No one knows that we are in custody of the Stone.”

“And the students? What of their safety?”, wondered Flitwick.

“The Stone shall be insulated from the students. I shall personally ensure that no student blunders into the defences of the Stone.”, replied Dumbledore, his voice stern with reproof.

“How long will the Stone be at Hogwarts?”, asked Sprout, her voice betraying her worry.

“A few months, no more. Alternative arrangements are being made for its protection and should be complete soon”, returned Dumbledore.

After this bit of intelligence had been conveyed to his unhappy staff, the headmaster changed the topic to the events of the coming academic year. Discussing them, Dumbledore remarked, "Minerva, I went over the schedules for the first year. Except for one small change requested by Severus, I think it should be fine."

"What is the change?"

"You had put Gryffindor and Slytherin together in the Potions classes. Severus requests that it be Hufflepuff and Slytherin together."

"Why that, Severus?", queried Minerva.

"Gryffindor and Slytherin have the smallest number of students, Minerva", replied Dumbledore, answering for Severus. "Placing Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff together will make one class too large and another too small. Besides, it would be easier to manage lesser numbers of students at a time."

Minerva's eyebrows went up at that – while it was true that there were more students in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, it was certainly not an unmanageable number, nor the difference between the numbers so large. All in all, there were less than five and twenty pupils in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Surely Severus was not so inexperienced that he would find it difficult to handle the number in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff? Besides, Hufflepuff was the largest, and Gryffindor the smallest. It would make more sense to pair them together, rather than Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. However, the requested change was a minuscule one and Minerva made adjusted the timetable accordingly, and dismissed the matter from her mind. They spoke of other matters concerning the coming term and the meeting was finished at length.

---(Scene Break)---

In the meantime, Harry had risen early and come down to breakfast along with Susan and Justin. The Staff table was empty, and Harry looked around uncertainly, but Tonks remarked, "Harry, I would start on my breakfast if I were you. The Heads will be having their pre-term meeting. They'll be down soon, and will have our schedules ready.

No telling when you will have your classes." The professors had joined them halfway through the breakfast, and Prof. Sprout had handed Harry and the other first years their schedules after breakfast.

Harry, who was sitting between Susan and Justin, glanced at the timetable and remarked, "History of Magic first, with the Gryffindors and then double Charms with the Ravenclaws, and finally double Transfiguration with the Gryffindors again. We've got a busy day today."

Finding their way in the castle was no easy task, and though they had been given clear instructions by Tonks, they still made it into the class only just in time. However, they needn't have hurried – the ghost who taught the class recked little of who was in class and who was not. History of Magic was a dreadful bore and Harry had deep difficulty staying awake. His only consolation was that he was not the only one experiencing trouble in eluding the soporific powers of Binns – the only one who seemed immune to the hypnotic effects of Binns was Hermione Granger.

Harry approached the next lesson with a bit of trepidation after the experience with History of Magic, but the Charms lesson was a fun class, with Flitwick teaching a simple spell that made a surface shine. Harry was able to complete that task without any trouble; many others, including Goldstein, Brocklehurst and Rosier had performed the spell perfectly and without any fuss.

The last class of the day was Transfiguration, and McGonagall began by calling out the names from a register, and giving everyone a talking to before beginning on the lesson. Harry had come prepared for the lesson, and as such found Prof. McGonagall's lesson extremely useful and enlightening. Prof. McGonagall was a patient teacher and took the time to explain difficult concepts. After a lot of complex explanations, Minerva set the class down to transfiguring a match stick into a needle. Harry had read the theory, and knew the concepts well; yet, he found the transfiguration no joke. It taxed his skills and he only just managed it in time. Two others, Hermione Granger, and Susan Bones, had also managed to complete the task ere him. McGonagall gave the class a bit of homework, told them to

submit the assignment on Thursday, and then dismissed them, requesting Harry to stay behind.

When the others had disappeared, Minerva relaxed her stern demeanour and smiled, "So, Harry, did you enjoy your holidays?"

"Yes, Professor. The Weasleys were kind to me", answered Harry.

A surprised look flashed across Prof. McGonagall's face, "You were staying with the Weasleys?"

"Prof. Dumbledore arranged it, ma'am", replied Harry.

"I see", commented McGonagall thoughtfully.

Harry took the opportunity to ask her a couple of questions. This would be an excellent time to test the waters with Prof. McGonagall. He would throw away a bit of information and see what came of it. "Ma'am, you told me that the instructions to get onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters would be in the envelope you gave me in Diagon Alley. Yet, I found only the ticket."

"Did you indeed?", Minerva seemed very surprised. She continued thoughtfully, "Those instructions are sent only to the muggle born or raised first years. The others are sent just the ticket. Perhaps there was a mistake and you were sent just the ticket, like wizard raised children."

"Perhaps", agreed Harry, although he seemed unconvinced. "Also, ma'am, my compartment on the Hogwarts Express was warded."

"Excuse me!", Minerva seemed completely thrown. Harry could see that her surprise was not faked. She certainly had not warded the compartment – the one who warded the compartment would not expect Harry to discover that.

"Quite that, Professor." In a few words, Harry described the encounter with Neville, the subsequent discovery of the wards, and the conclusions of Rosier and Goldstein. "How it was done, I can't say", he finished.

Minerva looked intently at Harry, wondering whether to believe him or not. Finally, she answered, "This is most surprising, Harry. Very few people are capable of such delicate ward casting. Offhand, I cannot think of more than three people in this country who could accomplish such a task – I very much doubt I could do it. I shall look into this. In the meantime, extraordinary as your experience has been, you seem none the worse for it. If you have any problems, you can come to me."

Prof. McGonagall's innocence in the warding business persuaded Harry to enlist her help in the task he had set himself. Harry had concocted a plan in his mind to expand his circle of 'friends' and further his scheme of learning the motivations of people for himself. Harry's plan required that he be in contact with a lot of people regularly – preferably a diverse set of students from all the four Houses. To begin hearing things from the different interest groups, and from different view points, Harry was seeking to set himself up as a listening post of sorts. Even otherwise, it was good to know people – by increasing his knowledge of the wizarding world, Harry would be more capable of deciding for himself. As such, a homework club which contained only his invitees would be a very convenient excuse to accomplish his desires. So he replied, "Actually, ma'am, there is one thing you could help me with."

"What is it?"

"I got on good terms with Daphne, Susan and Anthony, among others, over the summer, and they helped me with many of my doubts in my school work. We'd like to meet once a week to discuss homework and other matters of interest. As we're all in different Houses, I was hoping that you'd be able to help me in find a meeting place in this maze of a Castle."

Minerva smiled slightly when she heard Harry refer to the castle as a maze. She questioned, "How many of you are meeting?"

"I plan to invite a few more to the meeting, but all in all, it shouldn't be more than a dozen people."

Minerva nodded, "The classrooms along this corridor, except this one, will be free all over the weekend. You can use any of them – I'll let Filch know that I've given you permission to use the rooms."

"Thank you, ma'am. You're very kind."

"Don't mention it, Harry. Is there anything else?". Harry shook his head, thanked Prof. McGonagall once more and left. McGonagall smiled wearily – she felt that she had just emerged unscathed from a fencing duel with Harry, who had the wariness of a trapped animal. While the boy did not trust her completely, she saw he was slowly beginning to feel a little more secure around her. She hoped he would come to feel more comfortable in Hogwarts. She would reciprocate his trust and help all she could.

---(Scene Break)---

The next day Harry had his first lesson of Herbology – this was a pleasant class with the Slytherins. Prof. Sprout was a very capable teacher and Harry, partnering Daphne, had no trouble keeping up. That night, they all went to the astronomy tower to have their first lessons on Astronomy, a rather intensive class where students were required to memorise not only the names of planets and stars, but also involved a lot of calculation of planetary movements and their impact on magic. On Thursday, Harry's lessons consisted of another course of Herbology, and Transfiguration, along with the first lesson in Defence Against Dark Arts – the latter was shared with the Gryffindors. It was Harry's Defence against the Dark Arts lesson that would bring a novelty in the work, which thus far had consisted of little more than reading from books, observing specimens and performing a few simple spells. Here, Prof. Quirrell entered, called out the names, and the lesson began. Prof. Quirrell still stuttered badly, but the everyone had to acknowledge that his lessons, though unconventional, were informative and useful.

"The Dark Arts are not a set of spells that you encounter. They are more a philosophy of utilisation of spells. The most innocuous of spells can be used for defensive purposes, while many so called dark spells can be used to help, rather than harm. It is my job to teach you to defend yourselves against any

e-enemies. However, this class is d-defence against the d-dark arts, not a d-dark arts one. This t-term we will be devoting our attention to c-counter simple jinxes. I sh-shall perform a few simple jinxes and then the c-counter sp-spells. You may learn wh-what the jinxes are f-from my incantations – h-however, you are n-not to use them, certainly n-not against other students. If I find anyone using sp-spells from my class against other students, I shall m-make sure that they are ex-expelled!"

But before they began any spells, or theory, Prof. Quirrell told them that dodging spells was the best defence they could employ against hostile spells. He told them that this aspect of defence was of supreme importance, and with a wave of his wand, sent all the furniture in the class to a corner. Then he placed a number of enchanted balls which tried to hit the students, and it was their job to dodge them. Harry proved to be exceedingly good at this – fleeing from and dodging punches from Dudley and his minions had given Harry excellent reflexes, speed and stamina, and he managed to last the longest time before being nailed by a ball. In fact, the only one even remotely close to his performance was Susan Bones – who also proved to be very quick and agile, despite the fact that she did not share Harry's aesthetic build.

About half an hour later, Prof. Quirrell put away the enchanted balls, restored the furniture to their original places, and began teaching them a simple counter charm to a tickling charm. Harry once more proved to be good, and was able to perform the counter spell before anyone else in the class. Prof. Quirrell seemed impressed with his performance.

Finally, Quirrell dismissed the class with a bit of homework, telling Potter to remain behind. He remarked, "Excellent p-p-performance today, Potter. I am impressed."

Harry thanked him shyly, waiting for him to continue. Professor Quirrell began, "Potter, w-while the others may be f-fine with what is taught in class, I d-doubt it will suffice for you. You need to become good at Defence f-fast. In this I-light, I h-have been c-c-considering some extra I-lessons for you, if you are interested."

“I'd be delighted, Professor.”

“Have you gone through the b-books I gave you in D-Diagon Alley?”

Harry nodded his affirmation. “Good. C-Come down to my office on S-Saturday at noon, and we will discuss this f-further.”

---(Scene Break)---

Harry had been active during the week and was furthering his plans quietly and without fuss. By Friday, he had sounded out Granger, Longbottom, Weasley, Goldstein, Rosier, Bones, Finch-Fletchley, MacMillan, Greengrass, and Malfoy about his homework club. The response from all of them had been positive, although Malfoy and Weasley had seemed half-hearted at best about more homework. He had fixed Sunday afternoon, when all of them would be free as the time of the meeting.

It was Friday that would bring Harry the first shock in the new school. Harry got a letter from Hagrid at breakfast, inviting the boy to join him for tea that afternoon. Just as they were finishing breakfast, Prof. Sprout appeared, “Mr. Potter, the headmaster wishes to speak with you this evening at eight.” Harry acquiesced, as he muttered to Susan, “What have we got today?”

“Astronomy and then double Potions. A break in the afternoon.”

The Astronomy class was unremarkable, and Harry, who had a couple of doubts to ask Sinistra was able to come down to the dungeons where the Potions classes were held only just in time, but not before Snape had arrived. The latter looked up at Harry, and sneered, “Ahh – I see that our resident celebrity has just deigned to come to the class! Better late than never, I suppose – I think we will make it five points from Hufflepuff.”

Harry looked at his watch, and answered quietly, “There is still a minute's time before the beginning of the class, Professor.”

"How typical of you to assume you know when classes should begin! Another five points from Hufflepuff for talking back to a teacher. Now get into your seat, or it will be fifty!"

Harry did not say anything but subsided into a chair next to Susan, although he was completely confused and fuming inwardly. Snape called out the names, and then began firing off a series of questions he was certain no first year would likely answer one, let alone all of them, no matter how well prepared or thorough, at Potter. Unsurprisingly, Harry was unable to answer any of them. Snape berated Harry some more, and finally set the class down to a simple potion to cure boils. Harry took his place beside Susan, when Snape interrupted with his sneer, "Now, now, Potter, we can't have you sponging off Ms. Bones' intellect. You'll have to use your brains – what little you have. Ms. Bones – next to Ms. Moon. Potter – you'll be partnering Ms. Bulstrode."

All morning, Snape had been thinking of a strategy to achieve what the wily headmaster had demanded of him. 'Make Potter disliked, if not hated, in Slytherin!', the old man had ordered, and it was up to Snape, the head of Slytherin, to accomplish it without seeming to do so. Snape had been considering his course of action carefully. Just by seeming to disfavour Potter and his friends – and it was not as if the greasy haired Potions master needed an incentive to bully people, much less a Potter – he could ensure that many of his House would be opposed to Potter. There were many who saw the benefits of currying favour with Snape, and they would be only too pleased to follow Snape's lead in baiting Harry and antagonising him. However, there were others for whom ingratiating themselves with Snape was of less concern than being in Harry's good books. So Snape and the headmaster had come up with a scheme by which Harry would blot his books with the members of the most ambitious house in Hogwarts.

Harry's travails did not end with the beginning of the practical part. Snape kept stalking around, making supercilious remarks, and by the end of the lesson, Harry's potion, which was supposed to turn a deep crimson, began belching acrid, billowy, white fumes setting everyone coughing. Snape could hardly contain his glee as he examined Potter's and Bulstrode's effort, made a few caustic comments about Potter's stupidity losing both him and his partner points and deducted

ten points apiece from Hufflepuff and Slytherin for their 'pathetic' work, and assigned them extra homework. The greasy haired Potions master awarded both Greengrass and Malfoy ten points apiece for their excellent potion, and dismissed the class. Harry was conscious of the glares of Malfoy, his two thugs and a couple of others from Slytherin as he quickly left the class without waiting for his Housemates.

Snape's strategy was working perfectly thus far. Slytherins hated losing more than anything else in life – unlike Hufflepuffs, they admired the result, not the effort. Consequently, if Slytherins lost points, they would be very hostile to the cause of the loss, more so if it were because of the mistakes or idiocy of a student of another House. Snape had chosen his victim in Slytherin carefully. There were nine students in Slytherin in Potter's year. The parents of Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and Parkinson were all friends of Snape, and the overgrown bat had no desire to antagonise them. He had considered targeting Greengrass, particularly in light of her rumoured closeness with Potter, but if the girl were anything like her mother, she would be a capable potion brewer at the very least, and further, Severus had no wish to find himself the object of the formidable Priscilla Lestrange-Greengrass' anger. Tracey Davis was well connected to the Ministry, and Blaise Zabini's parents were obscenely rich, which made these two dangerous people to harass. That left Millicent Bulstrode, the most defenceless and least popular girl in Slytherin. Although rather rich, her family was not at all influential. Besides, the girl was certainly not charismatic. Anything she said in her own defence would likely be ignored or mocked. Snape would make up for the lost points for Slytherin in other ways. As such, Severus had had no problems in unobtrusively sabotaging Potter's and his partner's potion before castigating them.

In the meantime, Harry had not gone away after exiting the dungeon; though he was bitterly hurt and puzzled by Snape's behaviour. He was standing outside, just out of sight in an abandoned classroom, waiting for the others to leave the class. As the others filed out, he called, "Millicent, Daphne – a minute, if you are free."

Both girls turned; Millicent, the corpulent, heavy-set girl, was red faced with shame and anger, and Daphne was her cool, unflappable

self. Harry began without preamble, "I'm sure you observed that fiasco, Daphne. Considering that we'll probably be working on this pairing for the year at least, I was hoping you'd be able to help Millicent and me – if Millicent is willing, that is."

Daphne's eyebrows went up at that – this was not something she'd expected. "What do you have in mind, Harry?"

"I've been thinking of this botched potion. The more I think of it, the more I can't remember making any mistake – certainly not something that bad", Harry nodded towards Snape's classroom. "We got more homework than the others – I was wondering if you'd look over our essay after we've finished, Daphne. I wouldn't like to make mistakes again. Are you okay with that, Millicent?"

Millicent and Daphne were surprised, but both nodded in consent. Harry thanked Daphne and the slender Slytherin girl walked away. Harry had detained Millicent with him, and he spoke quietly, but firmly, "Can you think of any reason for Snape to hate you?"

Millicent, her small eyes narrowed further in puzzlement, returned, "What d'you mean?"

Harry explained patiently, "Snape was nasty to us back there, far more so than he was to any of the others, though Crabbe, Perks, Spinks, and Goyle messed up the work as much as we did. I'm almost certain Snape hates me. Why, I can't say, though. I've never met the man before. It's just possible he might hate you as well. Does he have any reason to dislike you?"

Millicent would have had to be deaf and dumb and blind not to note Snape's bias against them. But she could not think of any reason for the man to be so vindictive against her. She shook her head slowly.

Harry continued, "Well, then, it is me that Snape hates – at least, let's assume so. We'll find out why." He looked at her seriously, "Don't get me wrong – I've got no problems working with you. However, you're going to suffer for working with me. So, if you want to switch partners, I'll not object."

Millicent let out a hollow laugh. Find another partner? Already she had been shunned and mocked by the pureblood elites of Slytherin. Lacking beauty, the principal natural advantage of her sex, possessing no extraordinary magical talents, having no influential family ties to protect her, and being a halfblood, she had nearly become an outcast in less than a week. And while some like Zabini, Nott and Greengrass did not actively harass her, they did not waste any sympathy or attention on her either. As for finding a partner in Hufflepuff – she scoffed at the idea. Where was she to find another to partner with? She answered bitterly, “No, Potter, I've got no problems working with you either.”

“Very well, then. We start work on the essay this evening. Seven in the library. By the way, we'll be having a homework meeting as well, on Sunday afternoon. You're invited as well. I hope you'll come.” Millicent nodded in acceptance, and with that, Harry turned and was gone. Had Millicent watched his face another moment, she would have seen that the stoic facade he had maintained for the duration of the impromptu meeting had cracked, and she would have seen a bitterly hurt and deeply anguished young man.

---(End of the Chapter)---

(Author's Note: I am grateful for the number of replies and the diverse insights I received for the previous chapter. However, the number has also left me a bit overwhelmed. In keeping with my policy, I will be answering every single review in the next couple of days. So please do not feel ignored if you do not immediately receive a reply to your review of Chapter 8 after Chapter 9 is posted - you will get your answers. I usually reply to all reviews of the previous chapter immediately after posting a new chapter. )

## The Roaring Snake – 9

### Tea, Quidditch and Meetings

(Author's Note: In this chapter, we see a bit more of Dumbledore's manipulations. To my great dissatisfaction, I have seen very few stories that do justice to the subtlest and craftiest manipulator of the Wizarding World. This features my attempt to capture some of the old man's delicate manoeuvres.

One of my reviewers mentioned (Harry 2000 – thanks for the comments, Harry 2000!) that I need not explain all the manipulations right away. I confess that I am hiding at least as much as I am explaining. Much more will become apparent as the story progresses.

As usual, all criticism is welcome)

---(Beginning of the Chapter)---

Harry stumbled out of the Dungeons towards the Great Hall, where a quick lunch later, Harry went into the library. Two hours of solid work later, Harry had managed to find tentative answers to a couple of Snape's questions, even as he had failed signally to even find hints about the others. The complexity of those that Harry had managed to narrow the direction of his efforts almost assured him that the ones he had failed had certainly not been first year stuff. He made some necessary notes – he would discuss this with Daphne in their meeting. Checking his watch, he found that it was well past tea-time, and soon he was speeding across the castle grounds, hurrying towards Hagrid's place. Speeding down the narrow path towards the gamekeeper's hut, Harry did not notice where he was going and nearly rammed into Albus Dumbledore. Trying to stop suddenly, he skidded on the wet gravel, spattered both his own and the professor's robes with mud, and would have fallen, but for the steady hand of the old headmaster. "Sorry, sir", wheezed Harry.

Dumbledore merely smiled, and cleaned both their robes with a wave of his wand, and returned, "Not to mention, Harry. Hagrid is waiting for you, I believe. I will see you this evening."

“Yes, professor”, answered the dark haired boy, but Dumbledore had already turned away, and was striding back towards the school.

Harry looked for a minute at the retreating back of the old headmaster, shrugged, and knocked at the door of Hagrid's hut. The giant gamekeeper immediately opened the door, and waved Harry into a chair, while he put a kettle of water on the stove to boil, even as a boar hound tried to lick Harry's ears. “Don' mind Fang, Harry. He wouldn't hurt a fly”, smiled Hagrid as Harry was trying to avoid the huge dog's attentions. The giant began questioning Harry about his week, and his impression of Hogwarts, even as he worked to make some cakes and get the tea ready. While Harry was no stranger to attention, he wondered about the half-giant's interest in Harry's life.

Harry looked around the small place – hams and pheasants hung from the roof, a stash of dead rodents was stored in one corner, and a bunch of some kind of animal hair was hung on a wall – Hagrid was certainly not methodical, meticulous or orderly.

It was at that moment that Harry's eyes lighted on a printed piece of paper – it seemed to have been cut off from a newspaper. Ordinarily, a newspaper cutting would not have arrested Harry's attention; however, it was a completely out of place thing for the surroundings. Harry's interest was kindled – Hagrid seemed to have no books, or even reading or writing materials of any sort, in his humble abode. What then was this piece of paper doing here, and why was it of interest to Hagrid? Hagrid's attention was completely engaged in his culinary activities, so Harry took the liberty of running his eyes over the article. It spoke of a daring attempt at robbery in the Gringotts – one in which the Goblin bank, although broken into, had not lost any valuables. The goblins had insisted that the thieves had got nothing for their pains, for the vault that had been broken into had been emptied that very day. Harry had observed some comment in the Daily Prophet at the time of the theft, but the crime had not appealed to Harry's interest. The raven haired boy had simply disregarded it as an occurrence that did not appear within his horizon. However, seeing Hagrid's interest in the same attempted burglary, Harry's curiosity was piqued. Hagrid appeared neither the kind that enjoyed the excitement of sensational literature, nor one that studied the

intricacies of burglaries in whatever form. So why then was the large gamekeeper keeping that newspaper cutting?

Harry observed the date of the crime – it was the very day he had been in Diagon Alley. Something stirred faintly in Harry's memory – Hagrid had spoken of a task he had to perform for Dumbledore. Had Hagrid's task involved something that related to the robbery – or the vault in question itself?

Hagrid had finished making tea, and was horrified to see that Harry was reading the article about the robbery in Gringotts. He placed the tea and cakes in front of Harry, and when the boy put down the newspaper cutting, Hagrid immediately pounced on it, and secreted it in an inside pocket of his great coat. Harry's suspicions were confirmed – Hagrid definitely had a deep reason for keeping that cutting. Well, this would be another bit to discuss with his tentative allies in the coming meeting.

However, the boy made no allusion to it and they both began speaking of other things. Harry was amused to note that the giant shared Harry's antipathy for the caretaker of Hogwarts. The talk then turned to Snape – when Harry mentioned Snape's distaste for himself, Hagrid waved it off airily – a bit too flippantly, Harry thought, nor would the bearded giant meet Harry's eyes while discussing the sour, overgrown bat. There was definitely something that Hagrid knew about Snape, but was not willing to speak of.

On a hunch, Harry asked, “Hagrid, what d'you know of Millicent Bulstrode?”

“Never seen 'er before. Bulstrodes – they're a quiet family.”

“Were they involved in the last war?”, questioned Harry.

“Nah – they kept away from both sides. Why d'you ask?”

“Oh – she's my partner in Potions”, replied Harry.

Eventually, when the tea was finished, Harry thanked Hagrid for the courtesy and returned to the castle, thinking furiously about what he

had just seen and heard in the giant's hut. He had certainly learnt quite a bit. However, he had more pressing concerns for the moment. He had Snape's homework to work on, and Millicent would be coming to meet him in an hour or so.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry was working assiduously in the library, when Millicent joined him. Harry greeted her with quiet courtesy, and they immediately launched into their homework on the Potions essay. The girl was a steady worker and was easy to get along with. Millicent, on her part, found Harry Potter a far cry from her own House mates, who either ignored or mocked her. Perhaps the Boy-Who-Lived was not the spoilt brat she had imagined? Such speculation was laid aside as Harry found the necessary books, while Millicent took down the notes. At the end of the hour, Harry spoke up, "I've got to meet Dumbledore now. D'you want to keep on with this? Or shall we call it a day?"

"There's still a lot of work to be done, Potter."

"Okay", Harry nodded. "I'll come back as soon as possible. We'll get some more work done tonight, then."

Millicent nodded, "See you in a bit."

Harry walked up to Professor Dumbledore's office, spoke the password Prof. Sprout had given him, and stepped past the stone gargoyles. Knocking on the door, he received a summon, "Enter".

Dumbledore was seated at his desk, with his back to the light and his face in the shadow. He smiled at Harry, and pointed to a chair in front of his desk "Sit down, Harry. May I offer you a lemon drop?"

"No, thank you, Professor."

Dumbledore took a lemon drop himself, and sat facing Harry expectantly. "Well, Harry", he questioned, "How are you adjusting to Hogwarts?"

“Quite well, sir. It's been very interesting all round, sir”, returned Harry carefully. The light was shining in his eyes, and he could make out nothing of Dumbledore's expression, which was concealed in the shadows.

“Excellent!”, replied Dumbledore. “Now, there are a few things we must discuss. First, did you know that I'm your guardian, Harry?”

Harry nodded, his face cautiously neutral, as Dumbledore continued, “Harry, I am sure you are wondering why I never tried to meet you all these years. The answer to it is this – I wanted to keep safe. You see, your mother sacrificed herself to keep you alive. She invoked a powerful and ancient magic that protects you as long as you are with those of her blood. Your aunt, Petunia, is the only one of her blood, and her protection is what has been keeping you safe all these years.”

“But ..”, began Harry.

“What has that got to do with me not visiting you all these years?”, Dumbledore completed Harry's unfinished question. “Many of Voldemort's followers were – and still are – searching for you. Harry, among other things, the protection that your mother invoked makes you untraceable by most magical means. However, had I – or anyone else from the Magical World – tried to visit you, it would be possible to track us and, by extension, you. For your own safety, and the safety of other wizards and witches, we'd to keep away until you could come to Hogwarts.”

“And now, Professor?”

“Now that you are eleven years old, it is impossible to keep you completely untraceable. Some of the protection eroded away once you came to Hogwarts, and met other wizards and witches. However, the protection in Privet Drive is still extremely powerful. Apart from your mother's magic, I have added my own spells and wards to keep you safe there. As long as you visit that place once a year for a month, the spells will remain intact, and you will continue to enjoy the aegis of your mothers' magic.”

“Will I have to return to the Dursleys?” There was bitterness and outrage in Harry’s voice. Dumbledore interpreted it correctly. “I know that the Dursleys are not the best company or guardians, Harry. However, to keep the spells that protect you working, you will need to remain for a month at Privet Drive. After that, you can be anywhere you like.”

Harry did not like it, but did not voice his opposition at the moment.

“Nevertheless”, continued Dumbledore, opening a small packet and taking out a silvery object, “it will not do to take chances. This, Harry, is an invisibility cloak. It used to belong to your father – who used it mainly to sneak food from the kitchens when he was here. I have placed a shrinking charm on it so that it will fit into your pocket. When you need to put it on, just tap it with your wand and say ‘enlarge’, and it will be restored to its original size. When you have finished using it, tap it again and say ‘shrink’. Keep this on you at all times, and if you are in danger, disappear underneath it. Do not run recklessly into peril. Keep the knowledge of the cloak to yourself – it would be best if no one knows about your defence mechanism. Do you understand, Harry?”

“Yes, sir. But, surely, I am safe inside the castle, sir?”

“You should be, Harry, but one can never say for sure. Even in this castle, there are children of Death Eaters, and people whose sympathies lie with Voldemort, although they may not openly acknowledge it now.”

“Do you mean the Malfoys?”

“Lucius Malfoy was never convicted as a Death Eater, so I should not answer your question perhaps. However, between ourselves, they are one of the several families you should be wary of. But they are not the only ones, nor the most dangerous.”

“Who else ...”

“Harry, read any book on the last war and you will see what families supported Voldemort. Be careful.”

Harry and Dumbledore both sat in silence for a moment, and then Dumbledore began once more, “Oh – before I forget, here is an album of your parents' photographs. I thought you might like to have it.”

Harry, who had never seen his parents photographs before, was overcome at the kindness of the headmaster, and thanked him gratefully. The recollection of his parents brought a couple of questions he meant to ask, “Sir, what did my parents do? For a living, I mean?”

“Your mother worked for the Committee on Experimental Charms in the Ministry. Your father had all his attention and time engaged in taking care of the Potter estate. Your father was very rich, Harry. He owned several businesses, and managing them took all his time. He had other commitments in the Wizengamot as well.”

Harry nodded, the emotion about knowing about his parents overwhelming everything else. Dumbledore let Harry enjoy the sensation for a moment, as he steered the conversation into the area he desired. This part of the interaction being an important part of his plan, the old headmaster continued, affecting total detachment, “I am told by the Weasley children that you are an excellent flier. Your father would be very proud – he was one of the finest players in Gryffindor himself.”

Harry blushed at the comment, as he replied wistfully, “I wish I could play Quidditch for my House.”

Dumbledore seemed arrested at that remark, “Actually, you can.”, he answered slowly. “If you like, I will give you permission to try for your House team.”

“But I thought first years weren't allowed ...”

“The rule is principally to ensure that first years, who have no experience in flying, do not hurt themselves by trying to compete. However, there is no reason to keep a good flier out of the trials, just because he is a first year.”

"Won't the others want to try as well, sir?", questioned Harry curiously.

"Perhaps, Harry, but not many wizards are good fliers – from what I have heard, certainly not in your class anyway. It is most unlikely that any of them would make it into their team even if they were allowed. After Madam Hooch certifies their flying abilities, they might try if they like."

Dumbledore was giving him a chance to play a game he enjoyed by breaking a rule for his sake, Harry reflected gratefully, even as he nodded eagerly, "That'd be great, sir. But I don't have a broom."

"Not to worry. You will find your new broom waiting for you on Sunday."

"Thank you very much, sir. You're very kind."

Dumbledore nodded, "If you have any problems, Harry, my door is always open to you, night or day."

Harry thanked the old headmaster once more, and then left the room. Dumbledore leant back in his chair with a cold smile on his ancient face as the boy left the chambers. His plan was working perfectly.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry did some more work with Millicent that evening, but he was still quite a bit away from completing the Potions essay he had to finish. They called it a day at ten, bade each other a good night, and went back to their respective dorms.

Saturday dawned clear and bright, and until noon, Harry worked some more on his homework, this time with Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley, both of whom were as industrious and serious as Harry himself, when it came to studies. At noon, Harry proceeded to Prof. Quirrell's office. The nervous, stuttering professor greeted him and bade him be seated. "I said in cl-class that we would not p-perform the jinxes. That is t-t-true for others. B-But for you, it is b-better to start l-learning the jinxes as well – you never know when you

may n-need it. Have you g-gone through the b-books I gave you in D-Diagon Alley?"

Harry nodded in assent. "Here is a t-test. You have an hour. B-Based on your performance, we'll start the l-lessons from n-next week."

The test was fairly difficult, but Harry was sure that he had got most of the answers right. At the end of the hour, Harry handed back the test to Quirrell, thanked him for his kindness and left.

The pallid professor watched the dark haired boy walk away with puzzlement. Thus far, the boy had displayed perfect behaviour and excellent etiquette, which was what was to be expected. However, he had displayed very little curiosity, not even asking where the lessons would be held. Was Potter merely hiding his force of character behind his quiet and gentle exterior? Or was the flame of will dead and the core rusted, assuming that they had even existed at any time? Well – he would determine for himself the kind of person Potter was in the coming lessons.

---(Scene Break)---

By mid day on Sunday, Harry and Susan had finished all the homework for the coming week. They could look forward to a productive discussion with their colleagues. At ten to three in the afternoon, Harry, Justin and Susan went to the appointed classroom, and found Daphne, Hermione, Sakarbal and Anthony already waiting for them., their noses buried deep in their books. A chorus of greetings followed. Others arrived soon, Draco and Ron being the last. The meeting initially focussed on the assignments of the week and was very productive, with the non-Hufflepuff members coming up with many bits of information that Harry, Susan and Justin had missed in their essays. Hermione and Sakarbal explained some delicate theory in Transfiguration, while Daphne and Draco came up with some telling points about the Potions homework. Anthony helped with some simple charms that Harry was trying to learn. During the entire time, Harry was carefully cataloguing his companions.

Of the Slytherins, Draco Malfoy oozed arrogance from every pore and was over-confident about his abilities, but his knowledge of Defence

against the Dark Arts, Charms and Potions was very sound. He would be good if he could be bothered to concentrate on something – mostly, he felt that working was beneath his dignity. Millicent was decent at everything – a slow, and thorough worker, but nothing extraordinary. Daphne Greengrass' knowledge of Herbology and Potions was phenomenal, and she appeared to know offhand how each ingredients affected each other and the potion as a whole. If Harry could be sure of her loyalties, she would make a very valuable ally.

Of the Hufflepuffs, Susan was proficient with her knowledge of Defence against the Dark Arts. She also had a clear head, with a very accurate knowledge of the British Wizarding law. Justin and Ernie, were steady and patient, if unspectacular, students.

The two Ravenclaws were superb at Charms, and Rosier was extremely good at Transfiguration as well. They were quiet, cool and relentless, with deep insight into the subjects of their choice – the kind of people that made excellent researchers. They would be solid and reliable allies, if they were minded to take sides at all.

The Gryffindors were a mixed lot. Neville Longbottom was a very nervous, accident prone student, that lacked self-confidence. If he could be made more sure of himself, he might become better. Ron Weasley had a good sense of humour, but his academic interests were extremely limited. His knowledge of Quidditch and its tactics might be of interest to Harry, if he qualified for his House team. The last person was also probably the most complex one. Hermione Granger seemed to have swallowed all her textbooks en masse, and had every fact in her schoolbooks by heart. Her extreme love of books made her a veritable fount of pedantic knowledge. She knew very little about the Wizarding world, but as a fellow learner, with a deep curiosity for all aspects of the magical world, Harry could be sure of tapping her for some information that interested him.

At length, the meeting was finished, and Harry beckoned to Ron, Daphne, Susan, Sakarbal, Draco, and Anthony to remain behind. Harry had made up his mind about Snape more or less – the man hated Harry, and not Millicent. To exclude the possibility of Snape's

distaste for heavy set Slytherin, he queried the others, “What do you people know about Millicent?”

“Why d’you want to know?”, asked Anthony.

In a few quick words, Harry related his experience in Snape’s class. “Does he hate me or does he hate Millicent? Or both?”

Draco snapped, “You’re imagining things, Potter. Snape’s a great teacher. You’re not worthy of his attention.”

Harry looked coolly at Draco, but did not reply at all.

“Hate? That’s a strong word, Potter”, mused Daphne.

“I know that. But you saw what you saw.”

That remark silenced Daphne, who saw the truth of Harry’s comment. Daphne, Anthony, and Susan, who knew nothing of Millicent Bulstrode, could tell Harry nothing. However, Sakarbal answered, “I’ve never seen Millicent before. But I can tell you a bit about her parents, though.”

“What’s it?”

“Well – she’s a half-blood. Her father, Vitellius Bulstrode, is a squib who makes his living as a financial consultant of sorts for various wizarding companies – he’s said to be a genius with money. Her mother, Bianca Crouch-Bulstrode, works as an interpreter with various creatures like goblins and giants. She’s said to speak a number of languages fluently.”

“What’s a squib?”, asked a curious Harry.

“A squib is a non-magical offspring of magical parents, Harry”, answered Daphne pedantically.

“Ah! The famous Greengrass neutrality at its finest!”, sneered Malfoy coldly.

Daphne Greengrass shrugged, "My family's never been involved in blood based politics, and I'm not going to break that tradition."

Harry looked between the two, but neither seemed inclined to explain, so he left it at that. Harry then bade goodbye to his companions, and retraced his steps to the Hufflepuff common room.

---(End of the Chapter)---

(Author's Note: The chapter has been changed slightly (the conversation with Dumbledore), thanks to some insightful remarks by Inconclusive. Thanks, Inconclusive!

## The Roaring Snake – 10

### Follies and More Follies

(Author's Note: In this chapter, we begin to see some mistakes by those who wish to control Harry, and the first strains in Harry's group appearing. The lines between those who are for Harry and those who are for others begin to solidify.

It seems incongruous to me that no one would try to exploit the Harry-Snape enmity, or try to protect Harry from Snape's abuses. Headmaster or no headmaster, it augurs badly for the school that teachers get away with blatant biases.

As always, all criticism is welcome.

---(Beginning of the Chapter)---

While Harry was meeting with his friends, a meeting of a different sort was in progress in the Malfoy manor. "You see, Narcissa, it is important that we act now", announced Lucius grandly. "If we are to prevent that old fool from completely ruining our society, polluting it with muggles and mudbloods, we must remove him from his positions, both in Hogwarts, and inside the Wizengamot." Lucius Malfoy was inclined to grandstand a little, both in public and in private.

"Lucius", drawled Narcissa, unimpressed by the pomposity, "so many attacks have been made against the old man that I can't remember half of them. Yet, by an odd fatality, everything we do recoils against us, and we have had little profit for our attempts."

"This time, I have a fool proof scheme", the Malfoy patriarch assured his interlocutor. "I have a weapon that will cut down the old fool, and bring him down into the dust where he belongs."

"Outline your plan, and we will see", remarked his wife, half closing her eyes and leaning back in her chair.

"Draco has sent a letter that assures me that Harry Potter does indeed hate his muggle guardians. This evening, I have a meeting

with Dumbledore. It should be simple to get Rita inside and have her interview Potter.”

The aristocratic blond woman stirred, “Has Potter agreed?”

“What does his agreement matter?”, replied Lucius disdainfully.

Narcissa's expression manifested contempt, as she continued, “How do you plan to have the interview conducted?”

“I will have Draco take Potter and Rita to the dungeons, and let them have a chat.”

At this, Narcissa threw up her hands and burst out incredulously, “Am I married to a fool?! Do you imagine Potter will condone an invasion of his privacy as serious as that? The boy is full of pride and headstrong independence – he would not speak of his trouble with the muggles openly. Rita will just exaggerate and twist everything he says into what she wants. It will be a most effective way of destroying his trust in us.”

“You forget that you were a stranger to him them – he is friends with Draco now. He'll be happy to leave those muggles.”

“Rita is still a stranger to him. And while he may be happy to leave the muggles, he won't be grateful to us for it. As it is, Potter doesn't know we set Rita on him last time. This'll blow our cover. And, anyway, what do you hope to achieve through that interview?”

“Once Rita has exposed Dumbledore, we should find it easy to remove him as Headmaster from Hogwarts.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. While her articles might inflame the general public, Rita's penchant for invective and exaggeration are well known in the upper echelons of our society. Besides, this line of attack has already been tried once before and it was refuted neatly by Dumbledore – he will be on his guard for a repeat attack. Further, we need eight votes to remove Dumbledore, and of the twelve school governors, you can discount Ogden, Longbottom, and Hampden – they're Dumbledore's lackeys. Tofty, Bones, Wentworth and Erlicki –

they're pretty iffy. They'll wait and watch, see what way things are tilting before voting. Rosier and Black – they hate Dumbledore, but they'll demand Snape's scalp at the very least before supporting us. That leaves us with Avery, and Wilkes to support us. I don't give much for our chances of getting rid of that old coot."

Lucius was defensive at this cool rendering of his plans by his wife. He sneered, "I think you vastly overrate the difficulties. Anyway, what would the great Narcissa suggest?"

She shrugged, "I am afraid you overlook the problems. Myself, I'd counsel patience. I'd invite him here for Yule and get to know him better. I'd encourage him to trust us."

"You weren't against a Skeeter-Potter interview even after Dumbledore's refutation", reminded her husband.

Cissy saw it was useless to argue with her husband who had made up his mind. She answered quietly, "True, but I have been reviewing Potter's behaviour in my mind since then. Anyway, do as you will."

Lucius turned away to ready himself for the meeting, while Narcissa stood thoughtfully for a minute, reflecting on the possibilities she had. Lucius never thought of others' feelings, and his present scheme was folly. Potter would resent the interview, and very likely, despise Draco and her husband as well. She was painfully conscious of the weakness of the pureblood camp – most of the powerful pureblood families had been badly weakened during the last war. The Malfoys, the Rosiers, the Blacks, the Lestranges, the Averys, the Potters, the McKinnons and the Notts had all mourned the loss of their kith and kin, their nearest and dearest in the last conflict. It had been madness, fighting their own flesh and blood on the orders of a manipulative old coot, or a megalomaniac half blood bastard.

She sighed – given the limited recuperative and replacement powers of the pureblood families, there were very few representatives, often only one, in the younger generation. The mudbloods outnumbered them several times over in the new generation. Only a long peace, and a careful rebuilding of their families and fortunes could save them. The Potters were a powerful family, and any Potter at their side would

be an asset. If only James Potter had lived, they might have had a chance at a honourable peace – ah, but it was futile to think of what might have been. After the defeat, destruction, loss and ignominy suffered after the disappearance of the Dark Lord, they desperately needed a standard to rally round – in essence, Harry Potter. Her mind made up, Narcissa marched to the fireplace. If she could not act through her husband or her son to protect her family's interests, she would find another to help her. She tossed a pinch of floo powder into the dancing flames, and called, “Rosier mansion!”

---(Scene Break)---

Having finished his meeting, Harry bade goodbye to his Hufflepuff classmates, decided to go to the library and work some more on the questions he had failed to answer in Snape's class. He was so engrossed in his own thoughts about the matter that he did not notice where he was going. He turned round a corner and ran full tilt into Snape. The force of their collision sent Snape staggering backwards, while Harry's fall on to his back was even more impressive. Snape, conceiving that Harry, in his arrogance and following the footsteps of his father had rammed him deliberately, gave an inarticulate snarl and seized Harry by the lapels of his robes, shaking him furiously, “Thought you'd outdo your father in insolence, Potter?! We'll set that right now!” Normally, Snape would have been far more circumspect in his torment of his students – he would, at the very least, have made sure there were no witnesses to his mistreatment of his students. But a Potter to Snape was like a red flag to a bull. To the greasy haired professor's even greater discomfiture, as he shook Potter hard by the robes, the fabric ripped, sending Potter careening backwards into the wall rather spectacularly. Harry was not hurt, but more petrified with astonishment, and he lay on the floor for a moment, trying to come to terms with the latest development.

“Severus! Unhand him now!”, Professor Sprout's voice came sharply. The command was superfluous, considering that Snape had only some tattered bits of Harry's robes in his hands by the time; nevertheless, it made the sour Potions master more conscious of his surroundings. He whipped round in time to see outrage and shock – a feeling doubtless exacerbated by the fact that Snape was manhandling the darling of the Wizarding world – on the face of the

umpy Herbology professor, and a cold distaste on the face of Prof. Quirrell, whose wand was now unwaveringly pointed in Snape's direction. He commented bitingly, "I see you h-haven't outgrown your ch-childish sp-spite, Severus." Snape made no answer, but with another growl of disgust threw down the torn pieces of the robe on the floor, turned and disappeared in the direction of the dungeons, his robes billowing behind him. Sprout had hurried past Snape and was helping the now recovering Potter to his feet. A group of students was now gathering at the site of the recent altercation. Seeing this, Sprout ordered the students to clear off, and get back to their Common rooms. Quirrell repaired Harry's robes with a casual wave of his wand, even as he inquired, "Are you alright, Potter?"

Harry nodded dumbly, still shaken by the incident. Quirrell gestured to Harry to follow him, and led the raven haired boy to his office. He waved Harry down to a chair, and asked, "Tea?"

Harry nodded, "Thank you, sir."

Quirrell took a kettle of water, tapped it with his wand to heat it, added tea bags, and poured the liquid into two cups, offering one to Harry. As Harry's hand brushed against Quirrell's, he felt a strange burning sensation in the arm. However, it disappeared with the breaking of contact, and Harry, thinking no more of it, thanked him, sipped the tea, and inquired, "Why does Snape hate me?"

"He's got some p-problems with your f-father", answered Quirrell shortly. He continued, "There are m-many p-people who mistake g-gentleness and c-courtesy for w-want of strength. They r-respect only o-one thing. P-power."

Harry nodded, as Quirrell sighed wearily, "P-People don't understand how a-anyone can be s-superior, without using their strength to d-dominate. F-for your own, p-protection, you should l-learn not to be t-too m-mild." He looked seriously at Harry, "Meekness is often dangerous!"

Harry gulped, as Quirrell finished his tea. "If you are quite r-restored Potter, you should h-head back to your C-Common room."

Harry thanked him once more, and left the room. However, he did not want to go back to the Hufflepuff common room as yet. Too shaken to continue his researches, Harry decided to take a walk in the grounds and clear his mind. He went down to the lake, and sat down on a bench, partially hidden from view by a large tree, his feet dipping in the water. His expression might have been carefully blank and neutral, but inwardly, he was thinking furiously about what had happened. Several people had taken an interest in him, either on their own initiative, or that of their families. Of the adults he had encountered thus far, he was doubtful that any of them were trustworthy. Perhaps McGonagall came the closest to that honour, but could even she be completely trusted? Harry thought not – she had failed him in the investigations regarding his post. But within her limits, she could perhaps be relied upon to help him. She would be neutral at the worst. Harry pondered about Dumbledore – the man confused him. On the one hand, the headmaster had produced some very effective reasons for his isolation from the wizarding world and recently, had gone out of the way to help him. Harry could not deny that the old man's brand of protection had worked – after all, Harry was still alive, was he not? Nor could Harry detract from the old man's generosity in helping him try for the House Quidditch team, and thoughtfully procuring him some memoirs of his parents. But the very fact that the headmaster could act on his behalf without bothering to inform his subjects – or should it be his victims – for ten years was not conducive to furthering any trust. He would have to be careful. The other teachers and adults he had met, barring Snape, were polite and nice, but whether they could be relied upon in an emergency remained to be seen. And finally, there was Quirrell – he had been kind and helpful. What he said about power and people made absolute sense – all too well, Harry knew the wisdom of those words from experience. Yet, there was something strange about him, something Harry could not put his finger on. Harry sighed – the evening was turning to dusk. It was then that he was conscious of a shadow at his back. He turned to see a red-eyed Millicent, whose face reflected agony.

“Millicent, what's the matter?”, asked Harry, springing to his feet.

“Oh, nothing! I just came looking for a quiet place. Sorry to bother you.”

Harry took no notice of her denial – he waved her to the bench. “Sit down, please.”

For a moment, Millicent hesitated. The Boy-Who-Lived was puzzling to her. She had expected a pampered and arrogant creature – someone who resembled Draco Malfoy. But Potter was nothing like that – he was always nice and polite, and he seemed unconcerned with her blood status. She sighed, and let Potter steer her to the bench. Potter sat down next to her, but made no remark and continued gazing across the lake. They sat for a few minutes in companionable silence.

After a few minutes, Millicent could no longer bear the silence, and “Well”, she remarked.

Harry turned to face her. “Well, what?”

“Why’re you being nice to me, Potter?”

“Is there any reason I shouldn’t be?”

“Your Slytherin friends hate my guts. They’ve been making my life miserable.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose at that. “My friends?”

“I guess it’d be more correct to say – your friend. Malfoy. He’s been harassing me all week – him and his friends. Greengrass ignores me mostly.”

“Why’d Malfoy hate you?”

Millicent seemed to debate for a moment whether to answer that question. What did it matter? Potter would find out about her family sooner or later. She sighed, “I’m a half-blood. My dad’s a squib.”

Potter seemed nonplussed. “Why does that matter?”

Millicent gaped at him, wondering whether Harry was as naïve as he seemed or whether he was being deliberately disingenuous. However,

Potter seemed completely at sea, so she finally answered, "Some people, mainly in Slytherin, put a lot of stock in purity of blood. Since I'm a half-blood, without strong familial ties to protect me, I am easy prey."

Harry thought about it for a moment, and it made sense, covering several observations he had made about the blond Slytherin boy – his elitism, the way he looked down on Hermione and Justin, his sneering remarks about the muggles. He nodded, "What about your mother? Can't she protect you?"

Millicent flushed, "She was cut off from her family for marrying a squib. Only her uncle Barty tolerated her, but even he's kept us away for the last ten years."

Harry considered her words for a minute, before replying, "I'll try to get Malfoy off you. I'm not sure how much influence I've got with him, but I'll have a few words with him. I'll also tell Greengrass to help you if she can."

Whatever it was that Millicent expected. It was not this. She had expected him to mock her, ignore her, or at the best, offer her some lip sympathy. Instead, what she had got was something utterly different. Potter's sympathy, while entirely absent in his words, was shown more in his actions. What was even better, he was trying to help her on his own resources. She asked, "Why'd you do this, Potter?"

He shrugged, "Why indeed? For one thing, you're my potions partner, so I owe you something. For another, I know what it's like to be shunned – I live with muggles who don't like me much either. Most of all, you're a friend."

Millicent was silent for a long time. At last, she answered with her characteristic brevity, "Thanks, Potter."

Harry nodded, and together they sat in understanding silence for a long time – gazing out at the blue waters of the lake, both of them lost in their own thoughts. At length, Harry broke the silence, "Tell me, have you felt anything odd around Quirrell?"

“What d'you mean?”

“Do you feel uneasy around him? A sense of foreboding?”

“No”, was the Slytherin girl's laconic reply. Harry nodded, but made no further remark. Finally, the lengthening shadows gave way to the deeper darkness of the night, and it was time for them to return to the Castle. Quietly, they rose and made their way back. Malfoy was already waiting for him. Seeing Harry and Millicent, he called, “Ah – there you are, Potter. I was wondering where you'd got to. Get lost, Bulstrode.”

Millicent was about to turn, when she felt Potter grasp her wrist, and heard him answer, “I'd be glad if you'd stay, Millicent.”

Both Millicent and Malfoy was shocked – the former astounded at the gesture of camaraderie that Potter was sending and the latter wondering why on earth Potter was standing up for a worthless half-blood? “It's you alone, or none, Potter!”, he gritted.

“None it is”, returned Potter indifferently, already turning away from Draco. This was a gamble from Harry, but he had an inkling that Malfoy wanted something from him. Well, Harry would extract the best possible price for it, including alleviation of Millicent's distress in the house. Sending that signal about Millicent was a good start, something that could set the tone of the deal. Also, it was a good idea not to let Malfoy take him for granted. Clever as his technique was, Harry too was guilty of one thing – lack of diplomacy. Under normal circumstances, he would have been much more circumspect in his speech, and more tactful in keeping Millicent in the loop. However, Snape's behaviour, and Malfoy's bullying tactics had ruffled Harry, and that annoyance was now surfacing – finding the outlet at the blond Slytherin prince. Malfoy was, meanwhile, panicking. His father had ordered him to take Potter to one of the unused classrooms in the dungeon and get him to submit to one of Rita's interviews. He rasped curtly, “Fine. She can stay. Potter, there's someone who wants to meet you. Come with me.”

Harry and Millicent exchanged a glance, followed Malfoy into a low ceilinged, gloomily lit room, where a blond haired, gaudily dressed lady was waiting for them. Seeing Harry and Malfoy enter the room, she bounded to greet them, putting out a mannish hand with crimson talons. Draco opened, "Harry – this is Rita Skeeter. She would like to ask you a few things."

Harry had stopped dead at the words. He disregarded the outstretched hand of the reporter, and glared between the two for a long moment. Why had Draco brought the woman who had slandered and vilified him in the Daily Prophet article? Had the Malfoys been responsible for the first article as well? Harry would not be surprised if that were the truth – it made a lot of sense, now that he thought about Rita's possible source. Finally, he gave a curt bow, speaking in a voice so cold as to rob the words of their politeness, "Pleased to meet you, Madam."

"Ahh Harry, you seem well. I'm doing a piece about you for the Prophet. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

"Depends on the questions", returned Harry quietly, trying to regain his composure.

"I see you've found a charming companion", Rita nodded towards Millicent. "Would you care to introduce your girlfriend."

Harry reflected a moment, before replying frigidly, "May I introduce you to Millicent Bulstrode – a girl and a friend, not my girlfriend?" The last words were a sibilant hiss. He turned, and spoke to Malfoy, "Millicent has been telling me about what's been happening to her. I'm sure I can rely on you to set right her problems." The grave voice, though flatteringly decorous, carried an undeniable menace, which made Draco shiver for a moment. Rita continued, "How're you adjusting to Hogwarts?"

"Fairly well", returned Harry laconically.

"What do you think of Prof. Dumbledore? And who are your new friends? What are your feelings about your muggle guardians?" Rita's questions were putting a machine gun to shame.

Harry ignored her as he calmly addressed Draco, “Did you bring this lady to obtain my biography, Draco?”

Draco was fuming inwardly. This was not going as he wanted at all – Potter was not providing him with any dirt, either about the muggles, or the old fool. His answer was, consequently, one that cast caution to the winds – or perhaps he may have believed that Potter would be delighted to be rid of the muggles, no matter the price. He rasped, “Just tell her about those filthy muggles, and you will be rid of them soon.”

“How so?”

“They can be removed as guardians.”

“I see”, Harry responded. So the Malfoys had an interest in removing the muggles, probably Dumbledore as well, as his guardians, and likely stepping into the role themselves. Unpleasant though the Dursleys were, they were the devil he knew, and Harry was not about leap blindly into space. He would have to be certain of the outcome to participate in a scheme, and he knew little about the Malfoys to trust their plans. Bad as the present guardians were, the future ones might be infinitely worse. Most of all, the Malfoys’ arrogance and their taking him for granted in their schemes outraged Harry. If he acquiesced, it would set the stage for more manipulations and dirty tricks. He would put an end to this. He remarked coolly, “A very ingenious plan.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say about it?”

“I could say plenty of other things, but you wouldn’t like them.” Turning to Rita, he continued, “I’m afraid I have nothing else to say to you, madam.” He included all the others in a sweeping bow, “I will wish you all a very good evening.” He turned on his heel and strode out, leaving Malfoy and Rita staring in stupefaction at the empty doorway.

---(End of the Chapter)---

## The Roaring Snake – 11

### Crises? Or Opportunities?

Author's Note: One of the major annoyances in fanfiction is how Harry whines insufferably (and often interminably) about Dumbledore's manipulations, or ends up screaming at the old headmaster. A clever and forceful Harry should be able to find opportunities to fight back without having recourse to vulgarities or whining during such problems. After all, a problem is actually a chance to do something about it. In this chapter, Harry begins to counter some of Dumbledore's manipulations in his own way, and on his own resources.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.

---(Beginning of the Chapter)---

As Harry escaped from the dungeons, and made his way back to his own Common room, he ran into Sakarbal Rosier waiting for him in front of the Hufflepuff room. Seeing Harry, he spoke crisply, "Hullo, Potter! Got a minute's time? We need to talk – it's important." Harry looked up sharply – the last 'talk' had not gone well. However, Harry was nothing if not courteous and nodded in assent. The two made their way quickly to an unused classroom, when Rosier began without prelude. "I bring a warning. Rita Skeeter is trying to get an interview with you – Lucius Malfoy has set her on. Beware what you say to her. You do know who Rita Skeeter is, don't you?"

Harry did not need to be told the perils of courting Rita Skeeter – all too well, he had observed over summer, her vituperative and malicious quill. Harry nodded, but deciding to make sure of his suspicions, questioned, "Why would Malfoy send her after me?"

"Lucius has been trying to get Dumbledore removed as your guardian. I assume he plans to use your interview with Rita to make Dumbledore look bad. He would be able to step in as your new guardian, then."

"And that would be bad because?"

“I didn't say it would be bad. Being under the Malfoys would lead to a very different kind of life. At the very least, you'll get a superb political education – Narcissa Malfoy is a consummate political player.” He finished, “Well, I just wanted to warn you what's happening.”

Harry muttered, “Too late.”

“Pardon?”

“Rita already tried to get an interview with me.”

Rosier stared at Harry for a long moment before sighing, “I'm sorry, Harry. My warning doesn't seem to have come in time.”

“It doesn't matter”, replied Harry. “How did you know about Rita?”

“Auntie Cissa – Lady Malfoy to you”, he replied curtly.

“Lady Malfoy?!”, echoed Harry in surprise and confusion. Draco had just tried to get Rita to speak to him and Lady Malfoy was warning him about the dangers of talking to Rita Skeeter? What did it mean? Was Lady Malfoy trying to sabotage her husband's work? Or were they playing both sides of the game?

Rosier nodded, “She warned my father that Rita was after you, courtesy her husband. My father sent me the warning, and asked me to transmit it to you.” Rosier continued almost contemplatively, “Narcissa must have her own objective in giving us this warning – she is a very shrewd woman.”

“How come you know Lady Malfoy?”

“She's my godmother. She and my father are first cousins”, returned Rosier.

Normally, Harry would never have deemed of being so direct or undiplomatic. But the sense of being a pawn on a chessboard had been growing on Harry, as he asked, “Why does it matter to you what happens to me?”

Sakarbal Rosier could almost divine Harry's predicament. He had observed the articles in the Daily Prophet, over summer, prying into the life of Harry Potter and coming on top of them was today's interview. Harry would have to be stupid to not notice the games being played around him, and his sympathy went out to the Hufflepuff. Consequently, his frosty expression softened slightly, and his voice seemed a little more human than usual. "Harry, there are some who care about you, for your own sake. Your father was a hero to many in his generation, and there are several of us in the wizarding world who still cherish the memory of James Potter. Goodnight!"

---(Scene Break)---

Harry got back to the dorm, and made little allusion of what had passed to the others. On Monday morning, he rose early, showered, and dressed, and came down to breakfast, where four owls brought him a broomstick – a Nimbus 2000 – as Dumbledore had promised. Pinned to the cover was a note from the headmaster wishing him luck and expressing a hope that he would play well for his House, bringing it many accolades. Harry opened it to the envious stares of the other first years. For the first time in his life, he had a material possession that other classmates lacked. It was a pleasant feeling, and while Harry was not the type to gloat over his property, he nevertheless enjoyed the disgruntled and jealous stares that were shot his way. Draco Malfoy, many Hufflepuffs including Ernie, and Ron Weasley were all sending death glares at Harry. Ron's twin brothers seemed more amused than offended and they sent a cheery wave in his direction.

Harry's decision to parade his new toy in front of the school was a particularly stupid one and one whose wisdom he was to question ere lunch, and bitterly rue by the end of the week. The news spread around that Harry Potter had used his celebrity status to blackmail Dumbledore into getting him a broomstick and letting him try for the House teams in despite of the no first years' rule. The Hufflepuffs, who valued fair play and honesty beyond all other qualities were appalled to see the escapade Harry had played. The other Hufflepuff first years, with the exception of Susan Bones, and Justin Finch-Fletchley, were actively shunning him. While the Hufflepuffs' sense of

fairplay did not allow them to torment Harry, he had been, for all practical purposes, 'sent to Coventry' – a situation where no one was allowed to take the slightest notice of him, on pain of sharing his fate. When he had tried to ask the Quidditch captain about the tryouts, he was icily informed that he had to watch the notice boards, and could not expect favours from the others as he had from the headmaster. The general goodwill had all but evaporated, leaving Harry to reflect bitterly on the brevity of welcomes.

Gryffindors and Slytherins were mocking and harassing him openly. The Gryffindors were aghast at the way in which the 'Boy-Who-Lived' had dared blackmail their idol, Dumbledore, and managed to get away with it. The Slytherins were furious for a different reason. Lucius Malfoy had tried to intercede on his son's behalf about the 'no first years rule', but had found the headmaster adamantly refusing to relax the rule for others. Draco, consumed with jealousy, and hate filled that Potter had thwarted his father's schemes, had used his influence in Slytherin and turned most of the House against Harry. The Ravenclaws had seemed unimpressed with Harry's conduct and even the teachers, with the exception of Prof. McGonagall, were cold and distant with him. He had wished he could play quidditch, make his House, teachers and parents proud – all he had managed to attain was universal opprobrium. Perhaps, Harry mused bitterly, the adage that the gods granted the wishes of those they desired to destroy was true. He was learning the hard way that heads that are highly placed may, at any moment, be raised even higher – on the end of a pike.

However, none of this was new for Harry. He had spent the first ten years of his life shunned and loathed. It was merely a new set of people who were shunning him. The slight hope that he would be treated better in a world that hailed him as a saviour was now unravelling. Harry berated himself mentally – he had been foolish to indulge in false hopes of being treated decently. He was a hero here, and heroes were fair game for everyone. People envied him and wanted to prove that the clay beneath his veneer was as ordinary as the next man's and suffered from the same flaws. Unbidden, Prof. McGonagall's warning rose to the fore in his mind. She had warned him that every action of his could be catalogued, and his abilities charted by everyone. He had been foolish and had ignored her

warning for a minute. Now, he would need to rethink how to face this predicament.

Even Harry's own homework group was beginning to fray at the edges under the strain of this onslaught. Ernie, and Draco had not turned up at the second end-of-the-week homework meeting. Harry was nowise surprised, considering that neither of them had been all that interested in it in the first place. While the reasons for Draco's displeasure were understandable, Ernie – the self-appointed guardian of Hufflepuff values, had been offended by Harry's disregard for the ethics of fairplay.

The gathering at the end of the second week had been an acrimonious one. When they had all assembled, Hermione Granger had been coldly disapproving of Harry's conduct. Unlike the others, Hermione was not jealous of Harry's privileges – she merely saw it as a case of Harry circumventing the school rules, and the rule follower in Hermione was affronted at this disregard for the codes. She spoke, "Harry, if I were you, I would go back to Dumbledore and relinquish those privileges you got from the headmaster."

Ron backed her up, "She's right, Harry. You should give it up." Ron was jealous at Harry's luck and unhappy at the prospect of Gryffindor having to face one of Harry's calibre in the inter-house matches. It was not that Ron objected in principle to Harry being allowed to try – he simply objected to Hufflepuff having access to a very talented player. Quidditch passions held a great sway over the wizarding world, and the young redhead had succumbed to a particularly intense brand of Quidditch mania.

Neville backed up Hermione. "You shouldn't have forced Dumbledore like that."

It was Millicent who came to Harry's defence. "You haven't even heard Harry's side and you're already against him?" Harry gave her a grateful smile.

“What's there to say? Harry did get those special rights from the headmaster, didn't he?”, sniffed Hermione. She turned to the others for support. “What do you think of this?”

Rosier and Greengrass exchanged a sardonic smile, while Anthony replied. “Really, the only thing that matters is whether his exemption is justified. How he got it is immaterial.”

“And you approve of his getting what no other first years have?”

“If he deserves it, yes”, responded Daphne. Harry had nodded to himself – these three were ruthless fighters, for whom the only thing that mattered was winning. He had been right in his estimate of them. As long as he kept winning reasonably, he could be assured of their support.

Susan had cut in, “You should be happy he's getting a chance to play.”

“Yeah, you'd say that because Harry's in your House”, snapped Ron.

Justin remarked, “Harry, if you want to explain what happened, we're willing to listen.”

Harry smiled, “Thanks for the support, Justin. As for what happened, I simply wished that I could play for my House. Dumbledore gave me permission to try for the team. I definitely didn't insist, much less blackmail, Dumbledore.”

Millicent, Susan, Anthony, Daphne, and Sakarbal were nodding in assent. Perhaps they had realised that Harry had nothing to blackmail the old headmaster with. Ron looked disbelieving, and Neville uncertain – he had no reason to disbelieve Harry, but by the same token, he had been schooled to believe in the honesty of the Gryffindor classmates. The fact that Dumbledore had said nothing to contradict the rumour merely added substance to his suspicions. Hermione returned, “You're still breaking the rules, Harry. All others have been refused what you've got. It is unfair.”

“I'm not responsible for that”, replied Harry. “Why don't you ask Dumbledore about it? Anyway, why does it matter to you? I've never seen you interested in flying!”

“I'm thinking of others who wanted to try”, she retorted.

“Ahh – the self-appointed Rhadamanthus1”, muttered Rosier with a cynical twitch of the lips. “Try worrying about your own problems, Granger.”

“You should think of muggleborns who haven't yet had a chance to practice. They might be good.”

Hermione had unconsciously touched a nerve. Among the purebloods were many who prided themselves on their fairness, but were unwilling to let go of their privileges. The integration of muggleborns into the wizarding world was a very contentious issue that was tearing the wizarding world apart. Consequently, her words brought a strong reaction, as Greengrass snarled, “Are you the latest mudblood champion?”

“What?”, asked Hermione perplexed.

Neville flared up at that. “How dare you?!” , while Ron snarled, “You'll pay for that!”, reaching for his wand. He had scarcely drawn his wand, when he found himself staring down the wands of both Daphne and Sakarbal. Neville, supporting Ron, was still fumbling for his own wand, when Harry, who had held his calm amidst this fractious debate, stepped between the wands. “Neville, Ron, put down your wands. Daphne, Sakarbal – that's enough. This meeting is for discussing homework, not fighting amongst ourselves.”

Hermione still was looking outraged, and Harry continued, settling the issue. “I'm not going to justify what's happening. I didn't go asking to be allowed to try for the House team, so I'm not going to apologise either. If any of you've got problems with that, you can clear out.”

“You see nothing wrong with that snake calling Hermione a mudblood?”, shouted Ron. Harry looked gravely at Ron – his eyes said what he would not voice. The message was clear – calm down.

Furious that the Boy-Who-Lived was not offering him his unstinting support, he rasped, "Well, I'm out of this. Coming, Neville, Hermione?"

Neville timidly followed the redhead to the door. Hermione huffed angrily at Daphne and Sakarbal, but she looked torn – she was benefiting from the meetings, and was loath to forego them. Ron impatiently called again from the doorway, "Come along, Hermione. Harry can enjoy those slimy snakes' company!" Hermione looked at Ron and quailed before hot fury on the Weasley's face. She meekly gathered her books and followed Ron unwillingly, looking back over her shoulder more than once. Had she looked closely at Harry, she would have seen a quiet appeal in his eyes – an appeal not to leave. But she did not, she made her choice, and if she wanted the Boy-Who-Lived's trust and confidence again, she would have to earn it back.

Ron stormed out furiously, followed by Neville and Hermione, and the tension was like electricity in the room. No one else moved, and finally Harry began speaking about the agenda of the day's meeting. After a moment, all of them had settled back to discussing the week's assignments, and other news of interest.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry had been thinking carefully over the weekend – his group had suffered some serious problems over the last week, and he needed to do something quickly if his plan of setting himself up as a listening post were to have any chance of success. At this rate, he would be the pariah of the school soon. He had observed the Quidditch pitch carefully for the last week. Many of those interested in playing for their House teams were practising almost daily, and Harry, with his eye for talent, had scouted out two lone, but talented players whom he considered worth attracting to his group. A plan slowly began to form in his mind.

Katie Bell had been practising on her own. Without conceit, she knew that she was a very good flier. However, none of her yearmates had any talent in the game, so she was left to practise alone. She would hit the quaffle with a banishing charm, and then chase it on her

broom, trying to catch it before it hit the ground, or aim at the goalposts from a long distance. She heard a quiet voice, "Hello, there! Need some help?"

Katie looked around, and saw Harry Potter on his own broom behind her. Potter continued, "I've seen you practising since last week. You're very good!"

"Thanks, Potter", blushed Katie.

"Call me Harry. Like I said, I thought I might be able to help you practice. Are you trying for Chaser?"

Katie nodded, and Harry proceeded, "I can be Keeper if you want to try shooting at the hoops. Or I can play another Chaser and we can pass the quaffle."

Katie's brows went up at that. "What position are you trying for?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'm not sure I'll even be trying. But enough of that – shall we practise?"

Katie had her concerns that Harry Potter might not be good enough to practise with her. However, her worries were soon dispelled, as Harry displayed a consummate skill in controlling the broom and handling the quaffle. An hour's practice later, the both headed for the ground. Katie commented, "When Dumbledore allowed you to try, we thought you were just being gifted a chance. I see now that it is well deserved."

Harry shrugged, "If it's okay with you, we'll practice an hour every evening. I hope you get into your House team."

Katie agreed gratefully to Harry's suggestion, thanked him and left.

The next day, Harry had approached a stringy Slytherin named Terrence Higgs, offering to help. The latter, at first sceptical of Harry's motivations, and abilities, had warmed to the Boy-Who-Lived once he saw Harry's phenomenal talent on a broomstick. He was also grateful for the assistance.

For Harry, the advantages were obvious. While some of his year had broken away from his group, he had found others to compensate for them. His plan was still on course.

---(Scene Break)---

Old eyes followed Harry as he darted about the Quidditch pitch, alongside the blond Gryffindor girl, talking about things that headmaster could not hear from this distance. Over the past week, the old man had had much to cheer about. Once the news of Harry's special permission became known, Dumbledore, himself, had spread rumours about 'Harry's blackmail attempts' via the portraits. He had seen Harry being shunned and harassed – the Boy-Who-Lived was losing friends and allies at a pace faster than rats deserting a sinking ship. He had seen the hurt and bitterness in Potter's eyes, and had rejoiced. He could now hope that Harry would cloister himself away, and shut out everyone. It would make the old man's job of detaching Harry's friends from him easier. Soon Harry would be alone and friendless, making Dumbledore's job to manipulate him easy. However, the Boy-Who-Lived had reacted in a most surprising fashion. Instead of retreating into a shell, he had made friends with others, replacing those that had deserted him. Whatever damage the Dursleys had caused, they had not succeeded in curbing Harry's initiative, serenity, or quick thinking. While much of the school was still against Harry, the Boy-Who-Lived was making serious inroads in strange places. No sooner than one door had been slammed in Harry's face than the Boy-Who-Lived had found a way to prise another open. He was proving to be a most dangerous and capable antagonist. The headmaster would have to be more careful and crafty in his future games.

---(End of the Chapter)---

1The judge of the underworld in Greek myth. He was known for impartiality and fairness in his decisions.

## The Roaring Snake – 12

### Lessons, Quidditch, and Danger

(Author's Note: This chapter contains the first action scene in this story. Lately, I have been critical of people who write unrealistic action scenes. Let us see how well I can do when asked to complete the same task, shall we? The three headed dog of Hagrid was remarkably passive for one whose job is that of an attack dog. Here, we will have a souped up version of the dog (in attitude, at least) and somewhat better attempts at 'protection' of the area.

On a different note, I have changed the layout of the forbidden eastern wing on the third floor, and the corridor where the dog was to suit my needs. I have also made a bit of change to the size of the dog – no longer does it occupy the entire space between the floor and the ceiling. It would be extremely uncomfortable for the doggie if it had the ceiling brushing against its head, every time it stood up. In my case, it is much smaller – but no less dangerous.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.

---(Beginning of the Chapter)---

Now that Harry had been declared the persona non-grata of the first year, pressure was being brought on the others of his group to shun him. In particular, all the group members had been told to resign from his homework group. However, six of the eleven had ignored the collective will of the first years and these were now being the target of the other first years' ire. Worst, perhaps, was the fate of the two Slytherins. On Monday, Daphne found that her transfiguration homework had been shredded. The next day, Millicent had a quill of hers burnt. Both of them had been hit by several stinging hexes. Draco Malfoy had taken a lead role in systematically making the lives of both Daphne, and Millicent miserable, and was being ably assisted by Pansy Parkinson, who shared the same dormitory as the two beleaguered girls. The Hufflepuffs had not indulged in such destructive behaviour as the Slytherins, partly because of their own dispositions and partly because of the sobering presence of the head girl, Nymphadora Tonks, who had warned the first years sternly that

any harassment of a student would be harshly dealt with. However, both Susan and Justin were sharing Harry's fate and being ignored by all the other yearmates. The two Ravenclaws were in considerably less distress, considering that Ravenclaw was always a rather neutral House, given more to academic pursuits rather than quidditch interests. Nevertheless, it would have been safe to say that neither Rosier, nor Goldstein were among the darlings of the Ravenclaws.

Given their unpopularity in the school, Harry and his friends had taken to avoiding the company of their classmates, spending almost all their free time in the library or unused classrooms, turning up in their House only to sleep. Even at meal times, they would either simply pick up their food and leave the table, eating by themselves elsewhere, or else, they would sit with the Ravenclaws, where the hostility towards them was minimal. Minerva had been coldly disapproving of this behaviour of the students, but the headmaster had strictly forbidden her from intervening. It was not like she could have done much either.

Early on Friday, Harry was eating breakfast in an abandoned classroom with his coterie when Malfoy appeared with his two thugs, and a pug faced girl called Parkinson in tow. “Ahhh – look boys, it is the quidditch prodigy, and his bootlickers. Reckon you can stay ten minutes in the air, Potty?”

Harry looked indifferently at the blond ponce, while Sakarbal and Daphne exchanged an exasperated glance. “Do you want something, Draco?”, inquired Harry in a long suffering voice.

“Oh – it can speak!”, exclaimed Draco theatrically, as his two gorillas guffawed, and Pansy cried, “That's a good one, Draco!”

“Draco must be holding an invisible mirror, to be able to see himself so accurately”, scoffed Susan.

“Watch your tongue, half-blood”, snarled Draco. “You'll go the same way as your parents and uncle. But don't worry – Potty'll be with you there to keep you company – along with his parents!”

Harry rose angrily – it was bad enough that they had been driven out of the Great Hall. It was intolerable that Draco should follow them around the school, persecuting them. “Get out, Malfoy! You won’t get a second warning!”

“Ooooh – threatening people, are we, Potty? Dare to fight a wizard’s duel with me?”

Daphne grabbed a handful of Harry’s robes and pulled him back to his chair. “Duels are forbidden in school”, she remarked coldly. “And in any case, no one fights duels with Death Eater spawn of your sort!”

Draco opened his mouth to reply when a sharp voice sounded from the doorway, “What’s happening here?”. It was Professor McGonagall. Draco looked her up and down, and sneered, “Nothing, Professor. Just talking with Potter.”

“Classes are about to begin! Move!”, she spoke curtly, her lip tightening in anger at Draco’s courtesy. “Now, Potter, if you and your friends are done with breakfast, I suggest you do the same!”

Harry nodded, but turned back and spoke a quick question to Daphne, “Why didn’t you want me to fight a duel with Malfoy?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt”, she replied evasively.

“What does that mean?”, inquired Harry sharply.

She looked intently at Harry, and spoke in a worried voice, very unlike her usual cold, crisp tones. “You’re not ready”, she answered. “I know the spells he knows, and the spells you know. He’s been trained much longer than you. You’d be in danger!”

---(Scene Break)---

Daphne’s words had touched a sore spot in Harry’s mind. He had thrown every moment of free time into reading and practising from the books Prof. Quirrell had given him. His persistence was rewarded as the stuttering professor pronounced Harry ready to actually start learning the hexes. In the third Sunday class, Prof. Quirrell had begun

lecturning Harry. “One of the s-simplest offensive sp-spells is the s-stinging h-hex. Now, Harry, before we p-proceed f-further, let us d-discuss what d-differen..ti-tiates a curse from a h-hex, or a j-jinx.”

“Hexes are mild versions of curses, Professor.”, replied Harry.

“Quite r-right, b-but there is more. Curses can l-leave behind permanent or l-long term effects, un-until they are undone. H-h-Hexes do not. Jinxes are usually p-passive – their effects are n-not easily v-visible. They are also the m-most difficult to counter. This term, we w-will be devoting only to h-hexes. We shall be b-beginning with the S-stinging h-hex. Your S-Slytherin f-friends, I dare say, h-have suffered en-enough of it in the l-last week.”

“How d'you know about that?”, demanded Harry.

Quirrell had almost smiled, “Harry, I h-h-have seen Draco Malfoy d-doing it to D-Daphne and Mil-Millicent. However, P-P-Prof. Snape r-refuses to take action to h-h-help them, or p-punish Draco, so there is nothing I c-can do, other than h-hand him d-detentions when I catch him. He has b-become c-careful enough n-n-not to do it my p-presence after the first d-detention.”

“You see, H-Harry, this is one of the r-reasons you n-need to know offensive spells. You n-need them to p-protect not m-merely yourself, but also your f-friends who are less c-capable of fending for themselves. You n-need not use the sp-spells – the mere knowledge that you are able to h-h-hold your own is sufficient. Often, the threat is more p-potent than the act. P-P-Power to d-defend yourself is the key.”

Harry nodded vigourously in assent. All too well, he had seen the necessity of being able to assert his own. He had been sick of being bullied, both in the muggle world, and now in Hufflepuff common room.

“But to c-come b-back to the subject. The actual w-wand movement consists of a l-long swish, followed by a j-jab. The incantation is Fodio.

Harry repeated the word a few times, and practised the wand movement a couple of times without the accompanying incantation. Quirrell continued, once Harry had memorised the spell. "Very g-good. But the w-words are n-not enough by t-t-themselves. You n-need intent and f-focus. F-Focus is for obvious r-reasons – the p-place you want to aim, w-which should be in line with the t-tip of the w-wand – and at the p-point where you d-desire the effect. Intent – the d-desire to sting – is necessary to make the spell w-work."

"What does it feel like, Professor?", asked Harry curiously.

"W-When it works co-correctly, it c-causes a short jab of p-pain to sh-shoot up at the target area. It feels like a p-p-pinprick. C-Correctly used, it should be enough to c-cause people to be di-distracted or d-drop what they are h-holding, if they are c-caught unawares. However, Harry, it m-m-must be emphasised that there is n-no ph-physical effect apart from the m-momentary pain. You will not leave any m-marks on the one you have h-hit with the hex."

Harry worked on the spell until the end of the hour. Initially, his spell was weak and ineffective. Prof. Quirrell told him to focus on something he disliked – something he would not mind causing a bit of pain. He imagined that it was Draco, or Vernon, Dudley, or Dudley in place of the target, and while his aim something to be desired, his intent to hurt was then undeniable. More and more he was centring his feelings on the target, and his spell was getting stronger by the attempt. He had a genuine desire to dish out what he had suffered. Those that attacked his friends or himself should not go Scot free! Harry was so intent on his work that he had no eyes for aught else. Had he looked back, he would have seen a strange – almost contented – expression on the face of the professor. But he had no eyes – there was only the target – Vernon – Dudley – Piers – all those that accursed muggles that had hurt him. Oh! How he wanted them to feel what he was feeling! By the time he departed from Prof. Quirrell's office, he had mastered the Stinging hex. He had practised on a target Prof. Quirrell had enchanted – a target which would display the degree of his proficiency with the spell, and at the end of the practice time, had managed to obtain very good scores on the dummy. Thanking Prof. Quirrell for his time, he left the room.

As Harry left the room, Quirrell permitted himself a cruel smile. His master had been right in his estimate of the boy. Harry had strong feelings of hatred – the spell would never have worked so well else. Now that Harry had felt the rush of heady power that ran through the veins whenever one performed Dark magic, he would be easier to ensnare. Quirrell had chosen the spell carefully. While the spell was indeed one of the simplest, it was also one that required a genuine desire to hurt. The boy did have that – towards what, Quirrell needed to determine. Soon, he promised himself, soon he would show the boy real power, and real darkness. He would teach Harry to control and unleash that hatred in truly dark spells. He would turn the boy away from the Light. He would win over Harry for Voldemort!

---(Scene Break)---

Dumbledore had observed Harry practice the Stinging hex, thanks to Hogwarts herself. 'Poor Quirrell!', Dumbledore mused with cold amusement. 'His comprehension was always limited. He thinks I cannot observe what is going on in his room, if he removes the portraits and wards it against intrusion.' Everyone merely assumed that the headmaster learnt of what was going on in the school from the portraits, the ghosts and the house elves. It was all true, but it simply was not all of it. The headmaster could command the semi-sentient Hogwarts herself to do his bidding, in emergencies. It was a taxing job, it was true, requiring complete focus from the observer, but it was perfectly feasible, and Dumbledore could easily detect anything happening in any corner of Hogwarts. The old man reclined in his seat, and a frown creased his forehead. 'So Quirrell was trying to persuade Harry to dabble in the Dark Arts, and teach Harry to wallow in hatred and glory in pain. This was not a bad thing in itself. Harry turning into a Dark wizard was not Dumbledore's worry at all. As long as the boy served his purpose regarding Voldemort, Dumbledore was more than content to let Harry become whatever he wanted. Nor was Harry joining Voldemort a cause for concern for Dumbledore. The boy could always be disposed of if need be. No, Dumbledore's real nightmare was something else – something he could not permit Harry to become. For now, it was perhaps a good idea to actually let Harry learn something. Potter would have to face Voldemort soon. A half-decently prepared Harry might, in fact, be better.

---(Scene Break)---

The Quidditch trials were held late in the afternoon on the same Saturday that Harry learnt the Stinging hex. The previous day, Harry had had a short meeting with his friends – they practically met everyday these days, and usually hung together, both for company and protection. Harry had posed the question in general, “You all know I've been practising with Katie Bell and Terry Higgs. They're on their House teams. If I were to play on my House team, what would happen? To them, I mean.”

It was Susan who answered him. “They would likely be asked to choose between you and the team.”

“You think it'll come to that?”

“Harry, Quidditch's a craze here. If they're seen with you, they'll be suspected of leaking out the team secrets.”, responded Millicent.

“Damn！”, cursed Harry angrily. “What is there that's so vital?”

Millicent shrugged, “There's nothing secret, or important. But that's how it is.”

Harry had nodded grimly, but had said little else about the matter.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry had quietly appeared in the tryouts. During his practice sessions with Katie and Terry, he had determined that he was best suited to be a Seeker. He had two opponents to beat before he was accepted on the team – a fourth year named Cedric Diggory, and a sixth year girl called Gladys Whitstone. Harry was easily able to fly circles around the girl, while Cedric put up a more spirited effort, nearly managing to keep on par with Harry. However, Harry's nimbleness and superior broom control had their effect, and he was able to capture the snitch before the older boy. The captain, a seventh year girl named Karen Davis, was plainly displeased with the

turn of events, but called Harry and spoke, "Well done, Potter", she spoke with a grimace. "You're the new Seeker."

"No", returned Harry quietly.

"You said?"

"You heard what I said. I'm not going to be the Seeker.", answered Harry curtly.

The girl was dumbfounded. This was something totally unexpected.  
"Why not?"

"No first years are allowed. I'm not going to take advantage of Dumbledore's permission."

Tonks intervened at this stage, "Don't you want Hufflepuff to win the Quidditch cup, Harry?"

"Cedric Diggory's as good as I.", replied Harry, walking away.

"But why did you get permission from Dumbledore if you don't want to play?", called Karen after Harry.

"I already told you I didn't ask Dumbledore for it. It was Dumbledore's gift." He turned back to face the captain, "Look, I'll help you people practise if you like. But that position belongs to Cedric. Goodbye." With that Partian shot, Harry was gone, leaving a bunch of astonished Hufflepuffs behind.

Harry's decision to throw a bombshell had been an excellent one. Almost immediately, the hostile whispers that surrounded him had died away. While Draco and some of his Slytherin buddies still taunted him about being too cowardly to play, and the more die-hard Quidditch fans in Hufflepuff damned him for endangering Hufflepuff's chances at the Quidditch cup, most of the first years looked in puzzlement at this boy who would throw away what many would die for. Further, his denials about his forcing Dumbledore to grant him permission now carried far greater credence, and many were looking ashamed of their behaviour with the Boy-Who-Lived. The air of

hostility and contempt that followed Harry had been replaced by an air of puzzlement. Harry Potter was an enigma, and riddles did not generally excite loathing or fury in their comrades. Harry Potter had reason to smile in content – his gambit had worked perfectly, even if no one seemed to know his real reasons.

---(Scene Break)---

In the next few weeks, Harry and his group worked quietly, and steadily. Harry was making excellent progress in his lessons with Prof. Quirrell – he had enlarged his knowledge of hexes by including the burning hex – a spell that caused a burning sensation, the pinching hex, the itching hex and the flashing hex – a spell that caused a bright flash of light to erupt at the target. The latter was said to be very useful for causing a distraction in combat. Nothing outre happened in the school, and Harry was beginning to settle down in Hogwarts with his Hufflepuff mates. While Karen had turned down Harry's offer to practice with the team because he had refused to stop helping Katie and Terry, Cedric Diggory had no such qualms. He gladly accepted Harry's assistance in training for the Seeker job. Terry, Katie and Cedric each practised separately with Harry twice a week, Harry was more than happy to oblige – he was quickly picking up the skills of a very good Chaser and a Seeker.

Neither Ron, nor any of the other original members had approached him about the homework club, and Harry had made no overtures to them either. Things were resolving into the routine of a daily existence and Harry and his group were essentially left to their own devices. Harry's persistence about the homework had paid off, and the members of his group were doing very well in all the classes – toppers in all classes except History of Magic. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Harry Potter had something to be satisfied about.

---(Scene Break)---

One evening, in the last days of September, just as the light was fading, Harry was helping practising catching with Katie – him tossing the quaffle at her, and she trying to catch it before it hit the ground. They were both fairly close to the castle walls – it would act as the barrier and save them the trouble of retrieving the quaffle, should the

Gryffindor girl miss. Suddenly, the quaffle tossed by the Hufflepuff boy rocketed past her – almost as if a gust of wind were propelling it – about ten feet above, zooming through the castle window behind, disappearing beyond. Surprised, Katie turned to Harry.

“What did you do?”

The raven haired boy was looking every bit as astonished, “Nothing! I just threw it as usual!”

Harry continued to look thoughtfully in the direction the quaffle had disappeared, but did not comment upon it. He said, “Well, let's go and get it back.” Both of them landed, grabbed their brooms in their hands, and started in the direction of the castle.

But getting the quaffle back was not as easy a job as Harry had anticipated. For one thing, it seemed to have gone into one of those wings of the school that were little frequented by anyone. For another, most of the doors were locked here, and Harry had frequently had recourse to the unlocking charm – he reminded himself to thank Anthony for teaching him the charm. However, this maze was not easily tractable, and Harry frequently found himself facing dead ends, and other obstacles. Worse, he and Katie seemed to have lost their way, and there were no portraits either to ask for directions. Harry sighed, “Katie, have you any idea about where we are?”

The Gryffindor girl shook her head in mute denial. However, there was nothing to do but to go on. Wearily, Harry opened yet another door and entered a couple of steps inside, with Katie right beside him, when the door they had just entered by slammed shut. Aghast, they both turned back to look at the door which had just locked itself, when they heard a low rumbling noise. Whipping round, they stopped stock rigid. This door had not led to an empty room like the others. Instead it had led to a corridor where there was a huge three headed dog waiting for them, not twenty paces away. For a moment, the humans and the cerebrus gazed into each other's eyes, both taken utterly by surprise. Harry was rooted to the spot in horror and wonder, while Katie gave an inarticulate cry of terror. The next moment, the three headed dog growled – a deep menacing growl, and leapt at Katie with a frightening speed. Harry's comprehension returned with that

growl. In one quick movement, he had flung himself sideways and shoved Katie out of the line of the dog's charge, even as he ducked under the dog's foot. The claws missed him by just a few inches, as the heavy body careened past him. Harry came to his feet in the same move, grabbed Katie and pulled her up on to the broom – indeed, the girl mechanically mounted the broom when Harry urged her on – even as he mounted it himself and kicked off from the ground, taking to the air, floating a dozen feet or so above the hell hound.

The three-headed dog gave a few ferocious barks in their direction, and snapped and snarled, but the duo were out of its reach. Its mad yellow eyes still on them, the dog finally settled down near the doorway.

Katie had slowly recovered her self-possession. She murmured shakily, "Thanks, Harry. You saved my life!"

"Don't mention it. Question is – how do we get out of here?"

The two were safe for the moment, but staying up on the broom indefinitely was out of question. First they needed to open the door, but the only problem was that the unlocking charm he had previously used needed contact with the surface to be opened. Therefore, they needed to get the dog away from the doorway. A plan slowly began to form in Harry's mind. The only problem was that the dog was unlikely to be deceived by the same trick twice, and there was precious little room to manoeuvre in this confined space. Only a flier of the highest calibre would be able to pull off a stunt of the sort he was contemplating. Worse, he would have to get it right the first time – there would be no second chances.

Katie had dropped her broom when Harry had pushed her away from the dog. Harry looked around, and saw a trapdoor at the opposite end of the corridor. He whispered his plan to the blond girl, and flew down towards the trapdoor, eliciting an immediate reaction from the three-headed mutt, which rose to its feet and growled ferociously. Harry ignored it, and flew lower. The dog snarled, and stalked slowly towards them. Just as it was in reach, Harry raised his wand and cried, "Mico!" . A flash of bright light erupted from Harry's wand, and

the dog, startled, snarled and leapt back. Harry held his broom steady – he was now within the reach of the annoyed and angered dog. It gave a thunderous bark and sprang at Harry. At the last moment, Harry jerked his broom almost vertically – of all the flying moves, the vertical streak was the most difficult, with the degree of arduousness increasing radically with the gradient of the ascent. However, Harry was nothing if not a consummate flier, and the Nimbus reacted superbly to his touch, rocketing upwards and out of the dog's reach. He could feel the dog's head grazing the broom's tail as they escaped above it – the momentum of the dog's charge however, made it rush past the target, clawing on the rough surface of the floor to recover its balance. Even as they had cleared the dog, Harry had desperately levelled the broom, whipped round and zoomed across the room. The blond girl, cleanly grabbed her broom off the floor as the raven haired boy flew over it. Harry barely slowed down, as he neared the doorway, his wand outstretched. "Alohomora!". The door flew open, and Harry flew swiftly through the portal, slamming the door shut behind him with his heel. Behind them, they could hear the fury of the cerebrus. They raced through several doors, shutting them behind them, not stopping until they had escaped a through a dozen doors.

Both listened intently – they had managed to lose the dog. At least, they could not hear it anywhere. Nevertheless, it was also true that they had managed to lose themselves even more thoroughly in the castle. However, finding one's way was a piece of cake compared to the ordeal they had just undergone. They methodically searched the area, until they found a portrait that could guide them. Ten minutes later, they had made their way back to the main part of the school.

Harry voiced the question that was uppermost in both their minds, "What's that death trap doing in a school full of children?" Neither of them had any answer. This was a mystery they had to solve.

---(End of the chapter)---

## The Roaring Snake – 13

### Halloween

(Author's Note: I have always held that collective abilities generally tend to outstrip individual efforts, simply on account of efficient division of labour, differing expertise, and mutual cooperation. This will be the theme explored in the chapter. Hermione fans might want to sit back and ponder this aspect. Far too often, I have seen Hermione leaving everyone else behind in her studies. While the girl might be very clever and industrious, the theory fails to take into account the fact that others are not stupid, nor are they lazy. Also, this will introduce some differences between purebloods and muggleborn students, which I haven't seen before.

Secondly, I am taking a rather new approach to Flamel. I am looking at the properties of the Philosopher's Stone a little more objectively than the vague description in canon.

Finally, my second action scene in this story – this one involving the wonderful troll. Personally, I see too many stories of Harry killing the troll, or *deux ex machina* occurrences which involve fortuitous events that save Harry from the troll. In this chapter, I have tried to introduce a different path, which conceives a smart and cool headed Harry trying to deal with the troll.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

Harry had lost no time gathering his friends and telling them about the three-headed dog and his adventures involving it. They made an excellent audience, gasping in the right places and Susan screamed when he described how the dog had attacked him and Katie. At least Susan, Millie, Justin, and Tony made a good audience; Daphne had lifted an inquiring eyebrow at his recital of the events., while Rosier had merely looked thoughtful; apparently, he was even less given to

exhibiting emotions than Daphne. There was dead silence when he finished his story. Finally, it was Millicent who spoke first, "A cerebrus!", she mused. "They are very specialised guards. Found only in Greece and Turkey. What's one doing in Hogwarts?"

Harry interrupted her, "What d'you mean 'specialised guards'?"

"They're one-way guards<sup>1</sup>, Harry. Usually, they're kept at entrances. They prevent anything going in one direction, but not the other."

"Interesting. Tell us more, Millie", urged Harry.

"They're warm weather creatures, very intelligent and are pretty vicious. They're fanatically loyal to their owner, but also very dangerous to others. In fact, apart from dragons, and basilisks, there are very few other creatures that'd stand against a cerebrus. They're also resistant to magic and poison. Cerebri are class four creatures according to the Ministry catalogues. You need to register the animal, and get a lot of clearances before you can keep one. Breeding one can only be done under Ministry supervision."

"How on earth d'you know so much about cerebri?", queried an astonished Harry.

Millicent shrugged, "My mother. She works for the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical creatures."

Harry nodded for a moment, before continuing, "I want to know what that dog's guarding."

"I want to know why." The remark had come from Justin like an arrow.

"Why what?"

"I want to know why they're guarding something in this school."

"That's easy", replied Susan. "Dumbledore. He's often got important and dangerous things about him. Besides, no one else would be able to guard anything in this school."

Harry cut in, "That's not the point, Sue. I get what Justin's trying to say. Let's say you're right about Dumbledore having something he wants to keep safe. How does he do it? He puts it beneath a trapdoor, and leaves a cerebrus to guard the door. But anyone could end up stumbling into the damned dog. Why was that door locked so that a first year could open it? Why were there no warnings telling students not to open the door? Katie and I were lucky – we had our brooms with us. What if a first year kid blunders into it? It just doesn't add up."

Susan nodded, but did not seem completely convinced. Tony spoke for the first time, "Actually, it'd be quite simple to ward the room so that no student can approach it. Everyone below a certain age could be repelled. Why wasn't it done?"

There seemed no answer to it, as the students exchanged flummoxed glances. Harry sighed, "Okay – that brings it back to the first question. What's the dog guarding?"

"I could try asking auntie if the Ministry knows anything", replied Susan.

"Last year that corridor was open – I asked Katie about it. This whole business started only at the beginning of this term. Logically, it is safe to assume that whatever is being guarded needed protection since the holidays. Agreed?", queried Harry.

The others nodded in agreement, and Harry continued, "When I visited Hagrid last, I saw a cutting of a Daily Prophet article about the break in into Gringotts. Now Hagrid would never bother with it unless it had something to do with him."

"Surely you're not suggesting Hagrid had something to do with the burglary!", replied Justin incredulously.

"Of course not! But Hagrid was running an errand for Dumbledore just before the robbery – in fact, on the very day we went shopping in Diagon Alley. On that very evening, there was a break in into Gringotts. I'd guess that Hagrid's job was to get the object from Gringotts for Dumbledore. It also explains the goblins insistence that

nothing was stolen. Of course, nothing would be stolen if the vault had already been emptied.”

Daphne had been impressed with Harry's reasoning. “Very good, Harry. But we're still far from guessing what is guarded.”

“Can you think of anything else happening during summer?”

They all shook their heads in mute denial. Harry pursued, “Well, we know that the object was shifted from Gringotts to Hogwarts by Hagrid under Dumbledore's orders. That's our hypothesis anyway. Now if we knew what's being held there ...” Harry's voice trailed off.

Millicent suggested tremulously, “Well..., I could be wrong, but we could start with the cerebrus.”

“How?”

“There aren't many who can control a cerebrus. In Hogwarts, there's only one person I can think of – Hagrid. You could try asking him, Harry. He might know. Meanwhile, I'll ask mum to find out if there are any cerebri registered in Britain.”

Harry agreed, “That's an excellent plan. Care to come along, Millie? He loves all strange beasts, and you seem to share his interests.” The large Slytherin accepted Harry's invitation. The discussion veered off in another direction. Just as they were about to break up for the evening, Harry wondered aloud. “Do you know if anyone else has run into the dog?”

Six pairs of eyes gazed in surprise at him. “I haven't heard of it”, “No idea”, “Shouldn't think so.” were the answers from the others. Harry nodded as if that had confirmed his suspicion. He'd have to ask around discreetly if anyone else had had the same experience. Harry's mind was working overtime – he had several mysteries to solve.

--(Scene Break)--

The next day, Harry and Millicent visited the large gamekeeper. Hagrid was delighted to see that Millicent was interested in animals. Soon they steered the talk to the cerebrus. Hagrid had admitted that the cerebrus – Fluffy, he had called it – was his, and that he had loaned the dog to Dumbledore to guard something. What it was he would not tell, except that it was between Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel. He seemed mortified about letting slip the name. Harry and his group discussed the latest development that night. When Harry had finished telling them about Nicolas Flamel, and wondering what Nicolas Flamel had to do with valuable and/or dangerous objects, Daphne interjected, “Harry, what you’re saying makes absolutely no sense. Why would Flamel want something to do with what’s guarded in Hogwarts?”

“Who is Flamel?”, questioned Justin.

“Nicolas Flamel is a famous alchemist. He’s made great contributions to potions and transmutation of metals. His knowledge of potion making is unparalleled. Among his many creations are the Philosopher’s Stone, the Flamelian Athanor, the Celsian Spagyric...”

“Daphne! Stop! You’re going off into your own world. Explain clearly to us lesser mortals what they are.”

Daphne gave a sheepish grin, before she began her exposition. “The Philosopher’s Stone is a legendary gem that’s said to transform any metal into gold. It also generates the elixir of life as a by-product. The elixir is known to prolong life indefinitely.”

“So, anyone drinking the elixir is immortal?”, questioned Harry.

“Not quite, Harry. It merely refreshes your vital organs, and greatly slows down the process of ageing. You can still die of disease, poison or violence.”

Harry nodded, as Daphne continued, “The Flamelian Athanor is a miraculous furnace – it adjusts the temperature exactly as needed by the potion maker – it is a necessity in making some extremely delicate potions. The furnace’s also known to generate the highest temperature attained in the world.”

“The Celsian spagyric is a modified herbal extract that is known to cure any and all poisons. Only Flamel has been able to create this material in the last hundred years or so.”

“Okay – what's Flamel got to do with Dumbledore?”, inquired Anthony.

“Dumbledore was Flamel's last apprentice before the man went into retirement. It's rumoured that Dumbledore and Flamel are friends.”

“I bet Flamel's asked Dumbledore to keep something safe for him”, remarked Justin triumphantly

Daphne shook her head in puzzlement, “That's what's strange. Flamel has withstood a dozen Dark lords. He's eminently capable of taking care of himself, and his property. His home's warded better than Azkaban. Even the Dark Lord didn't dare annoy Flamel. Trying to steal or seize Flamel's stuff's a quick way of committing suicide.”

“How d'you know so much about Flamel?”, asked Harry curiously.

“My mum tried hard to apprentice under Flamel, but he wouldn't accept anyone. He politely, but firmly, refused her repeated requests.”

“So Flamel wouldn't have needed to ask anyone to keep anything safe?”, queried Anthony.

Daphne assented, “Nor would he have needed Gringotts.”

“Maybe it's something Dumbledore and Flamel made together. Maybe it actually belongs to both, so Dumbledore needed his permission”, conjectured Harry.

“That's much more likely”, nodded Daphne.

“What if we asked Flamel about it?”, mused Susan.

"Firstly, I doubt you could just send a post owl to him. Even if we could, he'd never take us seriously. If he answered our letter at all, he'd tell us to mind our own business", returned Daphne.

"It seems that in solving one mystery, we've stumbled into a greater one", remarked Harry thoughtfully.

--(Scene Break)--

The next few weeks were hectic for Harry. With the schoolwork, quidditch, and working on the hexes taught by Quirrell, Harry had no time for anything else. The whole mystery about the dog had passed clearly out of Harry's mind. After the first few lessons, Quirrell had transfigured a few chalk boxes into animals and asked Harry to practice his hexes on them, while they ran round. Harry was singularly unsuccessful at it – his spells lacked power, his aim was often woefully inaccurate, and in short, he was hardly the success that he had been at hitting inanimate targets. Quirrell said nothing, but dismissed Harry after the lesson, and fell to musing. 'So Potter had a soft heart', he sneered mentally. While the boy could hammer the dead wooden board with his spells, he could not bring himself to target animals, even when he knew they were transfigured and not real. The boy, while perhaps a capable spellcaster, lacked ruthlessness. He needed to be able to wallow in the pain, glory in misery and despair, before he was able to fuel truly dark spells. He, Quirrell, needed to do something that would turn the boy's disposition more sour in future. For now, he wondered whether the boy was even capable of inflicting injuries in a battle. A cruel smile lit the pallid professor's face – he had just the right idea. Perhaps he could kill more than one bird with a single stone.

--(Scene Break)--

The weeks passed and Halloween was on them. The classes were all let out a little earlier on Halloween day, and Harry, Susan and Justin were hurrying down to the hall, and just in front of them was Hermione Granger. Just as they passed the Gryffindor table, one of the pastries on the table exploded violently, showering the three Hufflepuffs and Hermione with the food. Ron guffawed loudly seeing the bits of the sweet sticking to their hair and clothes. Hermione gave

Ron a death glare, while Malfoy commented meanly from across the hall, "Well, mudblood, it's an improvement for you. Magical food on muggle trash. No wonder you've seen how all magical folk avoid you – no one wants mudblood slime on their hands." Harry gave Malfoy a cold glare of disgust, but Hermione gave a whimper and fled the hall, tears streaming down her cheeks. The three Hufflepuffs left the hall then to clean themselves up.

As usual, Harry's group was seated at the Ravenclaw table – they had made it a habit to sit together, and they were about to begin, when Prof. Quirrell ran into the hall announcing that a troll had broken into the school, and that it was in the dungeons. Dumbledore ordered all the students to return to their dorms with their prefects, while he marshalled the teachers into groups of two. These groups were then sent off in different directions to search for the troll.

Just as they were all being led off by the prefects, Millicent gestured to the others, "Harry! He, Sue and Justin don't know about the troll. We've got to warn them."

Tony agreed immediately, and after a moment's hesitation, the two purebloods nodded curtly. "Okay – quick now, when no one's looking!"

The four sneaked behind suits of armour and then turned and ran down in the direction of the dungeons, with Daphne in the lead.

--(Scene Break)--

Hermione Granger was crying bitterly in an empty bathroom, her eyes bleary and bloodshot. Her forehead was burning, and she was desperately tired as she ran a weary arm over her lachrymose eyes. The Gryffindor girl was used to being shunned by everyone – this was nothing new to her. Everyone disliked the bushy-haired know-it-all beaver, the annoying bookworm who nagged everyone about everything, and she had resigned herself to having no friends in her life. For a brief period, when she came to Hogwarts, she had nurtured the hope that she would find some of her own outlook. She had followed Ron and his Gryffindor friends, 'helping' them do their homework, futilely seeking acceptance among them. But now that

hope had been cruelly extinguished – she had overheard Ron and Seamus brutally mocking her, even while they made use of her to get their homework done. How – oh how – could they say such things about her?! Hermione was still bitterly weeping over the turn of events, concealed in her bathroom.

Nevertheless, Ron's betrayal was not the only thing haunting Hermione. Throughout her elementary school, she was also accustomed to being at the top of the class in every subject, and here was was finding herself outdone by others. Not that she was doing badly – far from it. But she was only one of the several who were doing very well and she was not happy about it. While her aggregate score was still the highest, she was not the topper in every subject. She leant against the wall as she considered the recent grades. She was first in the class only in one subject – History of Magic. In every other subject, she had been outclassed. In Astronomy, she had been outscored by Sakarbal Rosier and Theodore Nott, in Charms by Anthony Goldstein and Sakarbal Rosierin Defence Against the Dark Arts by Harry Potter, Susan Bones, and Draco Malfoy, in Herbology by Daphne Greengrass, in Potions by Draco Malfoy, and Daphne Greengrass, and in Transfiguration by Susan Bones and Harry Potter. She could not understand it – how could they get a better grade than herself? She worked more than any of the others, and she was as smart as anyone else! Hermione never questioned the reasons for the success of the others – she merely questioned the causes of her own 'failure'. Had she analysed the situation with a cool head, she would have realised that there was nothing to be surprised about. Many of those who were outclassing her were people who came from magical backgrounds, with sufficient resources to have access to private magical education prior to Hogwarts, those who had often been intensely coached in the various subjects, for several years before they came to the magical school. It was only natural that their intense studies should pay off, and that they enjoy an advantage over those who were just starting to study magic.

Secondly, those of Harry's group enjoyed another huge advantage over Hermione. With differing skills and expertise, they simply picked each others' brains for the answers and helped overcome each others' weaknesses. Common sense based division of labour, cooperation, a strong will to win, and sheer volume of collective effort

were more than enough to neutralise Hermione's own efforts, who being single handed, and saddled with the far less diligent Ron and his coterie, was hamstrung in her efforts. Thus, howsoever assiduous, determined and clever the girl might have been, she had no way of matching the steady discipline, collective effort, varied skills, and intellectual rigour of Harry's group.

Finally, the long devotion to a particular branch of magic often left the pureblood students with a strong affinity for that kind of magic, but weaker towards others. For instance, the Bones and Potters were long devoted to Transfiguration and Defence against the Dark Arts, and Susan and Harry, consequently, had a strong propensity for this field. Similarly, the Malfoys and Blacks were famous (or rather, infamous) for their ability to use dark spells that few others were capable of. The Rookwoods were nearly unsurpassed when it came to knowledge of rituals. One of the open secrets of the Magical world was that the purebloods were often extremely good at one branch of magic, and markedly weaker in others. Muggleborn students were, on the other hand, much more well rounded with few perceptible strengths or weaknesses. It was almost as if the magic had not yet had the time to mature and adapt to the personality of the wizard or the witch. Thus, it was no surprise that Hermione was being beaten by Susan at Transfiguration, Anthony at Charms, Sakarbal at Astronomy, or Daphne at Potions, while she could easily outscore them in other subjects. Their magic was in tune with these disciplines, while hers was not.

Hermione was brought out of her reverie with a furious pounding on the door, "Hermione, you've got to get out of here!" a voice sounded – it was Harry's as she would find out later. When the others had found him and Justin, the raven haired Hufflepuff had insisted on coming down to tell Susan and Hermione also about it since they hadn't known either. The others had followed him. Susan had just emerged from the bathroom when the others appeared to warn her. Harry had turned his attention to warning Hermione next.

The bushy haired girl didn't answer the first time, wishing that whoever it was would go away but a minute later, the pounding redoubled and the voice called, "Get out of there! There's a troll loose in the castle!"

She opened the door, a sarcastic retort on her lips when she was brought to a dead halt at the earnestness in Potter's emerald eyes. Almost at the same moment, another cry – with barely contained panic – came from the outside, "Potter, get out of there – the troll's here already."

But it was nearly too late. A pungent odour assaulted both their nostrils and Harry grabbed Hermione, trying to drag her with him and out of danger. "Come on – we've got to get out of here." It was useless – the girl, in her fright, was rooted to the spot, and would not move an inch. Harry was still trying vainly to force the Gryffindor girl to move, when they both heard a loud lumbering noise, and in the doorway appeared the grotesque figure of the troll. Its long arms were dragging a club behind it, and the twelve foot monster snarled seeing the two. It raised the club and with a sideways sweep, it smashed the nearest sink, sending the bits of metal and stone in all directions. The water from the shattered pipe sprayed both the students, and began to collect in a puddle before the duo. Slowly, steadily, it began to bear down on the two first years.

A sudden grunt from behind the troll stopped it dead and it turned slowly, its sickly green eyes fixed on the new source of annoyance. Millicent was in the doorway that had just been vacated on the monster. She grunted again sharply, her arm outstretched. Without warning, the troll swung its club at the heavy Slytherin girl. Millicent jumped back, but the club grazed her ribs. It was enough to send her sprawling on the floor.

Harry's face was remote and cold, his eyes utterly emotionless. He was evaluating the possibilities and none of them was any good. He spotted Rosier and Goldstein running round the troll, trying to distract it from the fallen Millicent. He stepped forward into the puddle of water and a sudden idea flashed into his mind. He cried, "Mico!". A brilliant flash of light leapt from his wand to the back of troll's head. As a blow, it was utterly useless, but the bright light had caused the troll to turn once more from Millicent to Harry and Hermione. Hermione was still in shock and utterly useless. Pushing her to a side, Harry called to the two Ravenclaws who were hovering around the doorway. "Sak, Tony – freeze the water when I call!"

Manoeuvring to put the water on the floor between the troll and himself, Harry sent another flashing hex at the troll, annoying it. It gave a roar of rage, and rushed towards the Hufflepuff boy, as he had calculated it would when he sent that spell. Just before the troll stepped into the water collected on the floor, Harry called "Now!", and the two Ravenclaws cried "Congelo!" Immediately, the water froze, and just as the troll stepped on the block of ice, Harry shouted, "Tractus!" This was the critical part of Harry's plan – using a pulling hex to dislodge the sheet of ice that had formed. Harry knew that his spell was unlikely to be able to move the sheet of ice much. But moving it even a bit would be sufficient for his plans. The slippery floor and the momentum of the charging troll would do the rest for him. The most important thing was timing, and Harry had pulled it off perfectly. His plans worked precisely as he had anticipated. The ice shattered under the troll's weight, but the troll's foot had lost purchase on the glistening, glassy surface. Woefully off balance, it was carried towards Harry by the ice, its rush sending it at a breakneck pace towards the boy, an inarticulate bellow on its lips. Even as he had cast the pulling hex, Harry had flung himself sideways, and out of the troll's line of attack. The troll careened helplessly past him, smashing into the heavy far wall, lying there for a moment, dazed and out of breath. Harry utilised the opportunity to grab Hermione, and give her a sharp slap to bring her out of shock, following it up with the injunction, "Run!". Comprehension had returned to the Gryffindor girl with the impact of Harry's palm against her cheek, and her eyes were focussed again. The two rushed past the fallen troll ere it could arise again, and they were out of the door. Sakarbal slammed the door shut as Harry and Hermione shot past him, and turned the key in the lock. Daphne and Susan had helped Millicent rise to her feet, when a sharp voice sounded behind them, "What's going on here?"

It was Professors McGonagall and Sprout. They all exchanged a weary glance, before Harry replied to McGonagall, "Well, Professor, we've just caught your troll."

1The reference comes from Greek myth. The Cerebrus would allow souls to pass over the river Styx into the Underworld, but not allow anyone in the opposite direction. Herakles last task was to bring this dog into the surface world.

## The Roaring Snake – 14

### The Aftermath

(Author's Note: Minerva finally gets some leg room in this chapter. She and Harry have a heart to heart conversation and the foundation of Minerva's role as Harry's mentor-confessor is laid down. Harry shows just why he is to be feared. In very few HP fictions I have read are his intelligence, wisdom or charisma emphasised. HP fictions usually take the route that Harry is a very powerful wizard and consequently is to be feared. I am taking a different route to show Harry's resourcefulness and power. His observant nature, meticulous exploration of possibilities, and logical thoroughness in deductions are all established, as is his ability to evade questions without lying, edifying force of character.

Hermione fans can rejoice as she finally gets some space and her perspective is examined.

The credit for developing the chapter should go to my beta readers, Voice of the Nephilim, Korisovra, and Abstract Error. Thanks folks. Your suggestions were really fabulous.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

Minerva's face was a precious study. Surprise, anger, disbelief and worry vied for dominance on her visage, before the latter emerged victorious. However, her voice was sharp and precise as ever. "Are any of you hurt?", she queried.

"Millicent is, I think", returned Harry. He had turned to the heavy Slytherin girl who had just been helped to her feet by Susan and Daphne. "I'm alright, Harry", she returned. "Just winded."

The first concern of the transfiguration teacher was the safety of her students. Seeing that they were all relatively unhurt, Minerva went to the door of the bathroom where the troll was trapped, and waved her wand, transfiguring the wooden door into a steel one. Another wave of her wand, and she had conjured some powerful bars round the door. She turned back to the students, "What were you all thinking of?" Minerva's lips had thinned dangerously. "Why aren't you all in your Common Rooms?"

"That's my fault, I'm afraid, Professor", answered Harry. "I hadn't heard of the troll until my friends came down to warn me." In a few words, he briefly recounted the events of the evening. Millicent had, in the meantime, leant against the wall, clutching her chest. It appeared that, despite her insistence, her ribs were not anchored as securely as nature had intended them to be. In the meantime, Professor Sprout had made her way to the injured Slytherin girl and was now examining her gently. Looking at Professor McGonagall hard, Harry asked, "Permission to escort Millicent to the hospital wing, Professor?"

Minerva saw the struggling girl and Harry's look and her eyes softened. "Pomona, would you please escort the other students to their Common Rooms? I will be obliged if you rejoin me in the hospital wing – I will be with Ms. Bulstrode, and Mr. Potter."

Professor Sprout nodded, and left with the others, while Professor McGonagall spoke to a portrait to inform Dumbledore that the troll had been found and captured. Another message was sent to Snape that his student had been injured. Then, the three of them went down to the infirmary, Harry and Minerva helping the burly girl, and Millicent was relinquished into the competent hands of the Matron. In the meantime, Professor McGonagall had led Harry into an anteroom while the Matron examined the injured girl. With a wave of her wand, the elderly transfiguration professor enlarged the small table present there, and another wave of her wand had materialised the Halloween feast in front of them. She smiled at Harry, "It'd be a shame for you to forego the feast."

Harry thanked her and settled down behind the table. As he began to eat, Minerva sat quietly in companionable silence. Harry was

surprised – he had expected the professor to begin questioning him. Interpreting his surprise correctly, McGonagall murmured gently, “Harry, the headmaster will probably be here in a few minutes. He will ask you plenty of questions. I don't need to add to your burden.” Gratefully, Harry acquiesced, delighted at the courtesy she was showing him. A few minutes later, Prof. Sprout appeared, with Professors Dumbledore, Flitwick, Snape, and Quirrell in tow. The old headmaster beamed, “Ah! There you are, Harry! I trust you're none the worse for the experience.”

Harry nodded quietly. He did not know what, but every instinct was screaming to him to watch himself. “Can you tell us what happened, Harry?”, questioned the old headmaster, his eyes twinkling.

Harry looked down at the floor, observing from the corner of his eyes the expressions of the teachers. Quirrell, and Flitwick seemed genuinely interested in his fortuitous escape, Snape was malevolent as ever, McGonagall and Sprout had moved closer to him, a gentle and concerned expression in their eyes. Still looking at the floor, he replied, “My friends came to warn Susan, Justin and me of the troll. We came down here, but were trapped by the beast, which chased us into the bathroom. We managed to dodge it, and lock it in.”

“And why did the others have to warn the great Harry Potter?”, sneered Snape. “I suppose the headmaster's warning was insufficient for your swollen head!.”

“Severus”, admonished Minerva sharply, while Sprout sent a death glare at Snape, but Harry seemed oblivious to the greasy haired potions master's scorn and briefly spoke of the exploding cake, and the subsequent departure of himself, Susan, and the others to clean themselves up. He gave an involuntary shiver at the memory of the troll cornering them. Although Harry didn't know it yet, he was being hit by the reaction of the events, now that the adrenaline he had been operating on was wearing off.

“And how did you dodge the troll …”, began Dumbledore, but Minerva came once more to his rescue. She had observed Harry's shudder and putting a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder and spoke, “Albus,

the child has just been through a harrowing experience. Look at him – he is distraught. You can question him later.”

Sprout and Flitwick agreed, while Quirrell, his face utterly neutral, remarked, “We've got a more immediate problem, headmaster. What shall we do with the troll?”

Dumbledore was torn at this. On one hand, he wanted Harry to trust him voluntarily and give him the information he desired. On the other hand, if he pressed Harry too hard about the troll, the boy might begin to resent the old man. Besides, Dumbledore could always find out what spells had been performed in the bathroom by questioning the others and detecting the magic used. If Harry had used dark spells, there would be time for action later. Deciding to let the matter slide for the moment, the headmaster awarded Harry ten points for his bravery in trapping the troll and dismissed him. Harry requested to see Millicent, but was told that the Matron was working on the girl, and she would be better off for a night's rest before she had any visitors. Sprout then led him to her office. She waved him to a chair and then seated herself behind her desk. She began very quietly, “Are you alright, Potter?”

“Yes, Professor.”

She continued, “Potter, I don't know what's going on in my House, but your stay hasn't been the most comfortable. The welfare of all my students is my concern. If you've had any problems, you can come to me.”

Harry thanked her and left. Pomona Sprout sighed – Potter surely was related to an oyster. Outside of class, he barely exchanged a single word with anyone outside his circle of friends. Dumbledore had asked her to keep a close watch on Potter. He had hinted that Potter needed guidance and help, considering the amount of pressure on the boy. But that would be very difficult if Potter simply kept his distance from the best the Light had to offer.

--(Scene Break)--

The next day, just as Harry, Justin and Susan were leaving History of Magic, Granger called, "Harry!"

Harry turned, "Yes?"

"Harry, can we talk for a moment?", breathed out Hermione.

"Sure", returned Harry laconically.

"Away from the others", insisted Hermione.

Harry's eyebrows went up at that. Justin began to step away, with a murmured apology, but Harry grabbed his wrist and pulled him back. He gestured to Susan and Justin, "They're my friends and you may say anything before them you wish to say to me."

"Oh! I just wanted to thank you for saving me yesterday", said Hermione in a rush.

"Don't mention it. I just did what anyone would have done." Harry's voice was dismissive.

Hermione was distraught. She seemed to desperately want to say something else, but was overwhelmed by embarrassment. She muttered, "Thanks, again", and ran down the corridor, disappearing quietly. Justin remarked, "Harry, the girl wanted to ask you some things, but didn't dare say it before Susan and me."

Harry looked at him questioningly, as Susan chuckled, "The great Harry Potter could have granted an audience to the resident bookworm. She'll be so heart-broken."

"Oh – do shut up!", mock growled Harry, dismissing the incident from his mind.

Hermione had run down the corridor, tears of frustration streaming down her cheeks. To her infinitely greater embarrassment, she ran head first into McGonagall. The dark haired professor steadied her, and seeing the first year's tears, was startled. She quietly ordered the

Gryffindor girl to follow her, led her to her office, waved her to a chair, and offered a biscuit. "What's wrong, Ms. Granger."

Hermione was too mortified by the occurrence. So she muttered, "Nothing, professor."

"Don't be silly, Hermione. I've seen you in tears a lot during the last few weeks. Now tell me, what's wrong?"

Something inside Hermione snapped, and she was soon pouring out her problems to her Head of House. The bushy haired girl spoke more than she had since the beginning of the term. She told McGonagall about the other Gryffindors disliking her, even when they made use of her for their homework. She spoke of how she had been crying in the bathroom when Harry had saved her from the troll. She informed the Gryffindor Head how she had gone over intending to thank Harry, and ask to be allowed into his homework group again. She told her how she wanted to promise him that she would never betray him, and that she owed him her life, but confronted with the cool, distant and composed Harry, her courage had failed her. The great Harry Potter was with his friends, and she could not bear to demean herself before them, and ask him for a favour. Harry, too, it seemed had not been able to divine her intentions. He certainly had not offered to welcome her again into his coterie. She finished dismally, "You see, professor, maybe it's a good thing if I went back to the muggle world. No one likes me here."

McGonagall's spoke gently, "Hermione, I'm glad that you unburdened yourself to me." She placed a hand under the young girl's chin and forced her to look up into her eyes. She spoke slowly and deliberately, "Hermione, very few actually dislike you here. Go back to your classes, child. I promise you, I'll make sure you are more welcome here."

--(Scene Break)--

Two days after the battle with the troll, Minerva stopped Harry after a transfiguration class. She locked the door with a flick of her wand, gestured Harry into a chair, and spoke, "Harry, I'd be obliged if you go over what happened with that troll."

“I already told you, ma’am”

Minerva replied mildly, “Yes, but you omitted a number of details. For one thing, you were dragging Ms. Granger behind you. I would imagine you saved her. For another, the troll was at the far end of the bathroom – no one could have managed to dodge the troll in that small, confined space. Finally, I saw shards of ice in the bathroom. Now, there would have been no ice in the castle – the rooms are all maintained magically at a constant temperature, well above the freezing point of water. So, Harry, how do you account for all of these facts?”

Harry looked at her, trying to make up his mind, and Minerva continued, “Harry, I am not blind to what is happening. Yesterday's accident was the latest in a long chain of events since summer that seem centred on you. You can trust me – your parents were my students and then my close friends. Anything you tell me will remain between us, unless it endangers others. I only wish to help you.”

Harry considered his choices – after all, this would serve as a good test case, and it was not as if what he had done would remain a secret for a long time. People always talked – that was Harry's experience – and if he did not tell McGonagall, most likely Granger would. Very likely she already had and Minerva was testing him. Besides, Harry desired some information, and Minerva was in the perfect position to supply it. Finally, Harry desperately needed someone with authority in the school that he could trust. The elderly transfiguration teacher fit the bill perfectly – at least as far as he knew. Consequently, he told McGonagall exactly what had happened, and what he and his friends had done. He finished, “How do you think the troll got in, ma'am?”

Minerva was dumbfounded. Having been a teacher for three decades, many times she had seen her students exhibiting ingenuity. But this went beyond the ordinary. To bring down a mountain troll that weighed at least three times the combined weight of its opponents with a combination of a simple freezing charm and a pulling hex was astonishing, to say the least. She emerged from her own ruminations

at Harry's question. She replied, "I am not sure, Harry. The headmaster avers that it was an unfortunate accident."

"And you, ma'am? Do you think it was an accident?", pursued Harry.

Minerva shrugged, "What I think is immaterial."

Harry took no notice of her evasion. "Please, Professor, what do you think?"

Minerva looked at him for a long moment, wondering whether to tell him her suspicions. Finally, she admitted, "No, I don't think it was an accident. There are powerful wards around the castle to prevent outsiders – both human and otherwise – from coming in. Of course, it is possible that the wards might have failed, but ..."

Harry smiled with grim satisfaction, "I know it wasn't an accident, ma'am. There are several things that don't add up. The castle wards, Quirrell's story about the troll in the dungeon, Millie's experience, the troll's behaviour – all of them were wrong."

Minerva stared at Harry Potter, "What on earth are you talking about, Potter?"

"You don't see any connection between them? Well, they are linked – at least, I think so."

Minerva was intrigued, "How so?"

"Recount to me, ma'am, the events after Prof. Quirrell announced that a troll was in the dungeon."

"Well, Prof. Dumbledore sent the students back to their Common Rooms under the guidance of the prefects, and then paired teachers to search the castle."

"Pardon me, ma'am, but what were the pairings, and where were you searching?"

"I don't see the significance, but Pomona and myself were to search the ground floor – we were searching the rooms near the Great Hall, Albus and Severus went down to the dungeons, Filius and Aurora were sent to the first floor, ..."

Harry nodded, "You see, ma'am, if the troll got to the ground floor so quickly, it must have been through the nearest entrance to the dungeons, which is just past the Great Hall. If the troll had come that way, it would have run right into you and Prof. Sprout. I take it that it didn't pass you?"

"Quite right", answered Minerva, not sure what Potter was leading up to.

Harry nodded, "Then it must have come from one of the other entrances or before you started searching. You see, ma'am, less than a minute after Prof. Quirrell announced the presence of the troll in the dungeon, teachers were searching the school. The troll could never have gotten through the entrance near the Great hall without being seen by anyone after Prof. Quirrell's announcement. Therefore, it must have used other entrances. Are we agreed on this?"

Minerva assented, and Harry continued, "Now we come to a problem. There are portraits near all the other entrances to the dungeons. Sakarbal looked up the castle plan in the library, and we then went down and asked all the pictures near the entrances if any of them noticed the troll go past them. None of them had. Secondly, less than five minutes after the troll's presence was detected, my friends and I met it near the ground floor bathroom. If it had to come up from the dungeons and not used the principal entrance into the dungeons, it should have made full speed to be in time where we found it. But the troll was not running – in fact, it was slowly making its way up the corridor, smashing everything it could see. Again, if it had run all the way, it should have been out of breath by the time it reached us. It wasn't even breathing hard. Finally, Daphne checked the dungeons – nothing had been smashed down there. If the troll was in such a fury as to smash everything it could see on the ground floor, surely it wouldn't have spared property in the dungeons? Therefore, it is most unlikely it ever came up from the dungeon."

Minerva had listened open-mouthed to Harry's exposition. "Anything else?", she queried.

"Yes, Professor. You see, Millie insists that trolls are usually surly, but rarely are they bloodthirsty, or aggressive. They generally tend to avoid humans. It is very rare for one to go on a rampage without reason. Further, Millie knows a smattering of the troll tongue. She told me that when she tried to tell the troll that we were friends, it lashed out at her with its club, breaking her ribs. Millicent is certain that this is extraordinary behaviour for the troll. Now, we have a strange combination of events – the troll, which should never have been able to get in, and which happened to be in the dungeon less than five minutes before, managed to avoid being seen by a bunch of teachers, portraits and ghosts, came up to the ground floor and began smashing up everything without rhyme or reason, and attacked students who tried to tell it in its own tongue that they meant it no harm. Don't you see how unlikely all this is?"

Minerva was flabbergasted. Harry Potter had seen far more than she had done, far more than anyone else had done. She questioned, "What do you think happened?"

"Well, there are two possibilities. The first possibility is that the troll used one of the secret entrances that abound in this castle. But I'm not sure if trolls are clever enough for it. It may just have been dumb luck to find one. However, this explanation still doesn't cover the lack of damage in the dungeon."

"And the other solution?"

"The troll was never in the dungeon. It was somewhere on the ground floor and it attacked us. But that would mean that Prof. Quirrell lied about the troll being in the dungeon."

"And how do you explain the troll's aggression?", inquired Minerva.

"If the troll was let in, then the person who let allowed it in probably did something to enrage it", answered Harry.

"But why?", asked Minerva.

“Aye! Why indeed? I don't know. That's part of the mystery.” Of course, Harry didn't tell her that he thought it was possible that the attack was premeditated. He did not inform her that he had considered the possibility that the exploding cake was not an accident and that the troll was meant to come after him and/or his friends. But there seemed to be absolutely no motivation. Why would Quirrell lie, and why would anyone want to send a troll after him? It just didn't make sense.

Minerva sat silent for a few minutes. She didn't want to believe that a professor had lied, or that the troll had been deliberately brought into a castle full of children. but Harry's explanation hung together and she could not find any other solution which covered the facts. Finally, she replied slowly, “There is much in what you say, Harry. I can't believe no one else saw this. I will bring this to the attention of the headmaster ...”

“Professor, no!”, cried Harry.

“Why not?”

“Professor, please! You can't tell Dumbledore. You promised me you wouldn't tell anyone!”

Minerva looked irresolute, as Harry continued, “Don't you see Professor, there's no proof? I don't think Dumbledore would believe a student's suspicions over a teacher's word. It would only put Quirrell on his guard if he's really guilty. As it is, he believes he's got away with that lie. Let him continue to believe it.”

“But still ..”, began Minerva when interrupted, his voice almost pleading, “Please, Professor, trust me on this!”

Minerva slowly bowed, “Very well, Harry, I won't tell anyone, but there are two things. First, if you find anything else, I want you to come to me. Second, don't go endangering yourself. Promise me that!”

“I will, ma'am. Believe me, I'm not suicidal.”

Minerva asked, "Does anyone else know what you've told me?"

"My friends do, ma'am. But no one else."

The transfiguration professor continued almost distantly, "There will be an official meeting of the board of governors tomorrow to determine what should be the response of the school."

"I know, ma'am. I got a letter from the governors asking me to be present." Judging her worried glance correctly, he almost chuckled, "No, ma'am, they know nothing either. And my friends have agreed to hold their tongues in this regard."

Harry hesitated for a moment and then continued, "Professor, I'm allowed to bring an adult with me - 'to reassure me', to quote the letter. Would you accompany...?" his voice trailed off.

"Of course, Harry. I'd be delighted", nodded McGonagall, a small smile on her lips. Something else occurred to the Gryffindor Head of House, and she returned to her brisk, businesslike self. "Very well, Harry. There's another thing I wanted to talk to you about." Harry looked up as Prof. McGonagall continued, "Ms. Granger. Surely you've noticed that she's lonely and miserable?"

Harry looked questioningly, wondering what was coming. Minerva continued with a flush, "She's been friendless and unhappy here. I was hoping you would accept her into your group."

Harry was looking pensive. Thinking of it, it was surprising that it had taken the transfiguration teacher as long as it had to intervene on behalf of Granger. Hermione was McGonagall's favourite student, and the stern elderly lady had a soft spot for the muggleborn girl. Minerva prodded, "Yes, Harry?"

At length, Harry answered slowly and quietly, "She was invited once, and she left us in a huff. While she's no doubt clever and hard-working, she may not merge well with my group."

"Why not? Surely your friends will accept her if you do?"

"You mistake me, ma'am. My friends are not judgemental. They'll probably give her another chance. But will she accept them? She's bossy, full of her own rectitude, and believes every word of what she's read in her books. That attitude may not go well with my friends." Or even myself, Harry added silently to himself.

Privately, Minerva agreed with Harry's analysis. Hermione certainly had many lessons to learn. She'd have a word with the girl – try to diplomatically tell her to keep an open mind, and not force her values down the throats of others. Outwardly, however, she argued, "Don't you see, Harry, that's why I need you to help her? She's a clever and capable girl. If she's left alone like this, she may return to the muggle world, and we'll lose a powerful witch. I'm counting on you to help her settle down here."

Harry acquiesced, "I'll do what I can, ma'am."

--(End of the Chapter)--

## The Roaring Snake – 15

### Plans and Meetings

(Author's Note: In this chapter, we see some more analysis and planning from Dumbledore. I hope to capture the old man's genius. Further, Quirrell and Voldemort also muse on Harry's escape and what it portends for their own plans.

Further, what struck me as extraordinary is the way in which the troll incident was dismissed in canon. Students were nearly killed and no one protested against the old headmaster? I think not. In this chapter, I will be dealing with Dumbledore trying to contain the fallout of the troll incident.

The credit for developing this chapter should go to my beta readers – Voice of the Nephilim, Korisovra, ParseltonguePhoenix and Abstract Error. Taxzombie deserves praise for his insightful remarks about interrogation of the troll.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

While Harry and Minerva were discussing the troll incident and its ramifications, Quirinius Quirrell was pondering with the infamous Dark Lord, the terror whom everyone feared to name, the problem of Harry Potter. Having set a dozen wards around his room – all benign wards designed to repel any scrying, intruders or unwanted visitors, Quirinius bowed to the incorporeal form of the Dark Lord. He spoke in a low voice, “My Lord, I did as you commanded.”

“And what happened”, demanded the Dark Lord impatiently.

“The results were most astonishing, my Lord. He trapped the troll with a combination of simple charms and hexes.” Quirinius related briefly the spells he had detected in the bathroom. Voldemort was thinking

furiously – he had had Quirinius let in the troll and send it after Harry Potter to test the boy's abilities and had found himself surprised by the solution Harry had come up with. He had expected Harry to try and use either his speed to run away, or attempt a dangerous spell fuelled by desperation – Quirrell had informed him that Harry Potter was reading the theory of some of the more dangerous spells, although the boy had never performed them. Harry Potter, however, had done neither of the things Quirrell expected him to do. Keeping his wits about him, the dark haired Hufflepuff boy had used some means to trap the beast in the bathroom. It was fantastic, unreal, incredible – friend and foe alike had been astonished by the quick-thinking, coolness and resourcefulness of the Potter boy. Finally, the high voice of the Dark Lord broke out, "Quirinius, that boy is more Slytherin than any we have seen."

"How so, my Lord?" There was faint curiosity in Quirrell's voice.

Voldemort did not like puzzles, and everything that defied his comprehension at once often excited disdain from the Dark Lord. Not that he gave up his quest to learn what was eluding him – far from it. But it irked him nonetheless. Here, Potter, his nemesis, was continuing to confuse him. The boy was utterly dichotomous, and some of Voldemort's feelings showed in his tone as he mused, "Everything is inconsistent about Potter. He got a wand as powerful as mine. We thought him a powerful wizard. Then he got Sorted into Hufflepuff – we considered him weak and lacking ambition. You saw him perform impressively in class and offered him extra lessons – we felt his inquisitiveness, power and curiosity. He was unable to harm living creatures, even when he knew they were transfigured. We believed him weak and sentimental. But faced against a troll, he was lucky enough to turn the tables on it. To trap it, mark you. Had Potter simply fled from it, it might have been thought of as a function of his speed, powered by his cowardice – or simple survivalist instincts. Had he harmed it, it would certainly have been something that had been fuelled by his desperation. However, he was aided by Providence – and his allies – to outclass it. He is resourceful. You say he saved a mudblood at the same time. He is a soft-hearted fool. However, he has put together a disparate group and successfully led them against a troll. Don't you see the divergence he is demonstrating? But beneath all these incongruities and

incompatibilities, what is he really like? What does Potter like and dislike? Whom does he respect and whom does he hate? What qualities appeal to him? What are his own views? His friends are equally diverse – two purebloods, three half-bloods, and a mudblood. Even disregarding blood purity, they have little in common – in interest or attitude. So what is Potter doing with that lot?. Don't you see the strange game Potter is playing?"

Quirrell thought that Voldemort was exaggerating. The Dark Lord had a mixture of fear and worry when it came to Potter. Always, he overestimated the boy's abilities, even if he would never admit as much. It was almost as if Voldemort suffered from PD – psychological dominance – problems when it came to Potter. However, he chose his words carefully, "My Lord, none of the points you mentioned are contrary. He may be like Dumbledore – a powerful, but soft-hearted fool", returned Quirrell quietly.

"You idiot! Dumbledore is not soft-hearted", snarled Voldemort. "That is a facade he puts on to mask his ruthlessness. Don't be deceived by his 'benevolent old man' act. But Potter – is he really a powerful wizard, but a soft hearted fool? Or is his lack of ruthlessness a mask? I wanted to know Potter's predilections before we acted. We could have given him incentives based on his nature to join us. But now..."

Quirrell inquired respectfully, "But does Potter's game – even if it exists – have anything to do with us?" He continued in a stronger voice, "He has shown no interest in your actions against his parents, my Lord. I have verified from his choices of studies that he has made no effort to study your campaigns or life."

"For the present, you maybe right, Quirinius", responded Voldemort distantly. "Potter's game does not seem directed against me. You say he does not trust that old coot – I am inclined to agree with you. But it is very doubtful that Potter will submit to anyone's will. It is becoming painfully clear to me that he is his own person and will bow to no one. His father had the same headstrong nature. His independence is a cause for concern, as are his toadies."

Quirrell interrupted, though the fear in his voice was obvious, "Pardon me, my Lord. But Potter putting together these students may be of

help to us. If you can bend him to your will, you will have gained a number of followers.“

Voldemort was silent for a long time. Finally, he replied, “It may just be possible to get Potter's camp followers on our side. However, I wouldn't be too optimistic. Many of them have lost their nearest and dearest at my hands. I simply can't see Bones, Rosier, or Greengrass siding with me – they know too much about me and the last war. No – we will have to eliminate them when we've got Potter. For the moment, we'll proceed with our original plan. Turn Potter dark, as we planned! And chart the abilities of his friends.”

“Have I leave to use harsher methods, my Lord?”

Voldemort considered the question for a moment. Finally, he answered, “Yes, that may be a good idea. It certainly won't do us any harm” His voice turned harder and colder, “Don't be obvious about it – the old coot is watching Potter closely.”

“Fear not, my Lord! I have a plan to hoodwink that old fool.”

“Good”, returned Voldemort neutrally. His next words struck a cold chill in Quirrell's heart. “For your own sake, you had better succeed.” He murmured silkily, “I do not appreciate failures”

--(Scene Break)--

Ten minutes before the scheduled meeting with the board of governors, Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore were sitting in the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore was composed and unruffled as ever, while Snape had his habitual cold sneer on his face. Dumbledore began, “How does your investigation of the troll incident progress, Severus?”

“Quirrell was not in the room with Hagrid's beast, headmaster. He went towards the third floor, but he never actually tried to get past the cerberus, as far as I know.”

“Hmm – we know he let in the troll to create a diversion. But if he was not going after the stone, where was he?”

“I don't know, sir. But I'll take oath that he wasn't anywhere near the dog.”

“Very likely he wanted to see if we were on to him, or if we suspected that troll to be a diversion,” conjectured Dumbledore pensively. A thin smile graced his lips, “That's why he sent it towards Harry Potter – to make sure that all attention was focussed there.”

“You think it is his plan to kill Potter?”

“Perhaps. It is possible. Or he may have tried to test Potter – if Potter failed, then he deserved to die. However, it is not just Quirrell who worries me, Severus, it is also Potter. Our plan is not progressing well. See – Harry is now closer than ever to his friends. And he doesn't trust us.”

“You think he mistrusts you, Albus?”, asked Snape, a little perplexed and shocked. Surely Dumbledore had not lost control of his golden boy, thought the greasy haired potions master maliciously.

“I'm not sure. He is wary to the last degree. You saw for yourself how he avoided questions about how he had managed to trap the troll. Then again, when the governors asked him to bring an adult with him to this meeting, he chose Minerva.” Of course, Dumbledore had not told Snape of the strained relations with the deputy headmistress. He continued thoughtfully, “I'm sure he doesn't trust me – or you.”

“Why did you allow the governors to invite Potter to the meeting?”

“I have no choice,” replied Dumbledore, a weary expression crossing his face. “A demand by four of the governors can call any witness in school to be present. Bones, Black, Wilkes, and Rosier demanded that Potter's evidence be taken into consideration.” Dumbledore's expression had suddenly turned more serious. “We must make sure that nothing comes of this meeting. I rely on you to create a distraction.”

“Very well, headmaster,” agreed Snape, before continuing, “But regarding Potter, perhaps it is time for sterner measures,” intoned Snape in his soft hateful voice.

“What would you do, Severus?”, inquired Dumbledore wearily.

“Perhaps an injury or two to his friends might encourage them off? A hint of what's in store if they continue to associate with that insufferable brat?”, murmured Snape, his voice silky with hatred and malice.

“Severus, your suggestions are unworkable”, replied Dumbledore, a touch of disgust tainting his voice, before continuing earnestly, “His group is showing real strength and resilience. Tested by adversity, they faced it with him! Confronted with imminent peril, they risked their lives for Potter, and he for them! Perceive how when the whole school turned against Harry, they were willing to accept the unpleasantness of being associated with him. Witness the way they went to warn him in despite of the knowledge that a troll was loose in the castle. Observe, too, how Harry was willing to go and warn Ms. Bones of the danger. And look how his friends went with him once more. Anyone managing to inspire this kind of loyalty is dangerous! Our efforts to isolate Potter have failed signally. He has attracted several odd students to his standard and managed to turn them from a ragtag, incoherent band to one that can fight and win against a troll!”

“Surely a mediocre student of Potter's calibre wouldn't be capable of fighting and winning against a mountain troll?!” , argued Snape, unwilling to conceive that the headmaster was crediting the fall of the troll to the idiot child who had the devil's own luck.

“Alone, perhaps not. But he was not alone. He and his friends managed to somehow turn the tables on the beast, and capture it, with a broken rib being the only casualty on their side.” Dumbledore was holding his voice patient with an effort. Severus could never think rationally when it came to a Potter. He continued with utmost seriousness, “I tell you, Severus, do not underestimate Potter! Given time, I have no doubt he will turn into a very capable leader!”

"I thought Potter's friends were hanging on to him for the celebrity status that Potter has."

"Perhaps they did begin that way, although even that I doubt. What is certain is that he has managed to win their confidence, and they his. In the coming years, they will prove to be a very formidable unit. This group could jeopardise all our plans seriously."

"All the more reason to adopt more ruthless means." Snape's desire to cause bodily harm to Potter and his cohorts was overruling his common-sense.

Dumbledore considered the plan for a minute. It did have a certain amount of profit to recommend it. But the risks far outweighed the gains. Consequently, he reproved Snape, "Perhaps later, Severus, For now, any injuries to Potter's group will draw more attention to us. Your hatred for Potter and his friends has been very manifest in the last few weeks. You've made no effort to conceal it. If any harm befalls Potter, or his group, you'll be suspected first. If the Daily Prophet gets wind of things not being well at the school, even I wouldn't be able to protect you. Your methods haven't earned you many allies. I cannot risk losing you."

Snape sighed. It seemed that he would have to hold his more ruthless instincts in check for some time, "What can we do then, headmaster?"

Dumbledore smiled, "I have an idea. We can try it soon."

--(Scene Break)--

Sixteen figures were seated around the round table in the headmaster's office, at whose head was the headmaster and the most powerful wizard in the world, Albus Dumbledore. On his right was the potions master and the person in charge of investigating the troll incident, Severus Snape. Introductions were made to Harry, and the meeting began with an icy remark by Regulus Black, "Headmaster, I am forced to ask what Severus Snape is doing here."

Dumbledore was inwardly triumphant. He had already managed to get on the nerves of Black. One of the reasons why Dumbledore cultivated Snape was that the greasy haired potions master was a very useful card – one who, by his very nature of personality, caused dissension. Now with Black taking the bait, the meeting would degenerate into a fight between Snape's allies and his enemies. The headmaster could quickly seize the role of the moderator, without appearing to do so. He decided to field the questions in style. He smiled benignly down the table, “Regulus, Severus has been investigating the troll incident, and is ready to make his report.”

“Ah – I see! Set a Death Eater to investigate the wards of Hogwarts. Is that it?”, sneered Lady Wilkes.

“Severus Snape is no more a Death Eater than I am,” reproved Dumbledore, while Snape sneered back, “I fear you are confusing me with your failure of a brother, Lady Wilkes!”

“Severus”, warned Dumbledore, while the tall and ascetic Hamalcar Rosier muttered, “Speak for yourself, headmaster. Your actions are getting more and more irrational with every passing year.”

“Lord Rosier! Your comments are unjustified and malicious!”, bit out Minerva angrily.

“While I quite agree with you about our esteemed headmaster, Lord Rosier, I must protest your remarks about Professor Snape. He has been a most capable head of Slytherin for the last fourteen years,” objected Lucius.

“Trust one Death Eater to stick up for another,” muttered Regulus bitterly.

“Lord Black, your remarks are unwarranted! Lucius and myself were acquitted of all charges regarding Death Eater activities ten years ago!”, protested Antoninus Avery.

“Well, so was my dear cousin, Bella, before she tortured the Longbottoms!”, snapped back Regulus.

“Lord Black, calm yourself!”, admonished Madam Bones.

“Lord Black, your slur on my honour is unprecedented!”, thundered Malfoy.

Augusta Longbottom cut in diplomatically, “Gentlemen, kindly cease this bickering. Perhaps it were well to keep to points that are of consequence. Albus, can you tell us what you've uncovered thus far?”

Dumbledore was laughing inside. Trust his enemies to botch up spectacularly. Dumbledore had always set one group at the throat of another and reaped the rewards of the carnage. The old man had become a master at this game. Though he never had the support of more than four of the twelve governors, he had always managed to play off one group against the other in the board and then have his own way without their interference. Malfoy, Bones, Black, Rosier, Wilkes, and Avery all disliked the way Dumbledore functioned. But they could never work together to outvote him. Malfoy and Avery looked down their pureblooded noses at the less conservative faction of Black, Rosier and Wilkes, while Rosier, Black and Wilkes mistrusted ministry authority, and consequently Bones. Returning that hostility, Bones was contemptuous of Death Eaters, present and past. Wentworth, and Erlicki were unconcerned with all this – they merely looked at what made good business sense, and Dumbledore had more to offer them on issues that actually mattered. Minerva was often forced to defend her boss, if only for decency's sake. The mutual hatreds, suspicions, interests and political platforms precluded cooperation between them, leaving the old headmaster free to play his games.

“Thank you, Augusta. Severus, if you will give us your report,” announced Dumbledore.

Snape spoke in his usual sour and disinterested voice, “While there are several wards here that can keep out dark creatures, in general only two are employed regularly. The others are either too draining on the ward grid, or else, inhibit effective functioning of the school. One must remember that this is a school, not a high-security prison. Consequently, we cannot simply shut off all entrances.”

“Cut the theatrics, Snape. Get to the point,” snapped Rosier irritably.

“Very well, Lord Rosier. The two wards that were in effect this year at Halloween were a simple notice me not spell that prevents creatures of limited intelligence from getting in and a dark creature repulsion ward. In general, trolls are not dark creatures.”

“What do you mean by that?”, asked Erlicki.

“Trolls are grey creatures, sir, not dark. They generally avoid humans and have no desire to harm any. The dark creature repulsion ward works on intent. The greater the intent to harm, the greater would be the repulsion felt by the non-human creature. Since this troll had no actual desire to cause mayhem, the ward may not have worked.”

As much as Harry hated the man, he had to admit that the fruity bat was a very capable wizard. He and the others listened spellbound as the sour professor continued, “The notice me not charm functions only on creatures of low intelligence. Unfortunately, it was so designed as to draw on protective and defensive magic of Hogwarts.”

“What's wrong with that?”, questioned Regulus.

“At Halloween, the day when dark and malevolent powers are at their height, the ward would be at the weakest. This fact, combined with a more intelligent troll than usual, may have caused the ward to fail, or rather, repel insufficiently. Moreover, we found that a couple of birds had died the previous night on school grounds. Trolls are greatly attracted by the smell of meat – particularly bird meat, and there was a wind blowing across the castle towards the Forbidden Forest. The troll's desire to get hold of that meat would may well have been sufficient to bring it across the ward.”

“If the troll was after the meat, why didn't it leave after getting hold of the birds?”, asked Bones.

“The notice me not ward is direction neutral. It exists along a line and repels away from that line. The spell that once repelled the troll away from the school would now repel it into the school, since it was

already inside the grounds. The troll might have been confused and come into the school."

"What has been done to correct it?", questioned Augusta Longbottom.

"We've added two more sources of power – two cross intent runes, to be precise – to power the notice me not ward. We have also activated a creature exclusion ward of Hogwarts. The headmaster and myself have tested the wards and found it more than adequate to guarantee against a repeat of a similar situation.

"Do you need help in handling wards, headmaster? It is not your specialisation, after all – nor Mr. Snape's", commented Hamalcar Rosier.

"We are more than capable of handling the Hogwarts wards. If any assistance is required, we will petition you," replied the headmaster magnanimously.

"Has the troll been interrogated, headmaster?" asked Regulus.

"Trolls are not over bright, and our questioning did not yield all answers. However, our interrogations established beyond doubt that it was completely confused by the amount of magic in Hogwarts. My guess is that it completely panicked once it got into the school, " answered Dumbledore.

Madam Bones intervened, "Thank you, Albus. However, we must ask ourselves how Mr. Potter was left to face the troll alone."

Snape cut in maliciously, "Potter and his friends chose to ignore the headmaster's warning and stupidly go off by themselves."

"Severus!", both Minerva and Dumbledore had spoken at the same moment, Snape fell silent, although his eyes glittered with hatred at Potter.

Dumbledore explained, "When the troll entered the school, the alarms worked and Prof. Quirrell who was monitoring the alarms, immediately alerted everyone else in the school. Unfortunately, Mr.

Potter and his friends didn't hear the warning in time," answered Dumbledore calmly.

Lady Wilkes cut in, "Albus, why did the troll attack students once it was in the school?"

"Well, who knows Andromache? It was in a strange environment. Fear, confusion, the magic itself – all of them would upset the troll," replied Dumbledore in a soothing voice.

Lady Wilkes nodded, and added, "Thank you, Albus. But now we'd like Potter to tell of his experience himself."

Consequently, Harry spoke once more of the unfortunate events on Halloween eve. He avoided mentioning how he had trapped the troll in the bathroom, merely telling everyone that he had dodged the troll's attack in the bathroom, and locked it in before it had recovered. There was silence when he had finished. Finally, Regulus spoke, "Excellent work, Harry! Not many people can keep their heads when faced with a twelve foot troll. The school's proud of you, young man."

"Indeed!", sneered Lucius Malfoy. "Potter seems particularly gifted at evasion."

"What have you done to ensure that the emergency warnings travel fast enough in the school, Albus?", questioned Mme. Bones.

"Filius has put in place a system by which, the headmaster's voice during emergency is heard in all rooms in the castle. We have also installed a system by which all portraits are aware of a warning, and will guide any students out of danger."

"Do you feel safe in the castle, Mr. Potter? Are you happy?", asked Mme. Bones.

"The headmaster and the other teachers have gone out of their way to make things safer for me, ma'am," answered Harry. "As for my happiness, Professor McGonagall and my friends, including Susan and Sakarbal, have been making sure of it." There was a smile on the

faces of Rosier and Bones, and a cold sneer on the face of Lucius Malfoy.

“Are you satisfied with your guardians, Potter?”, inquired Lucius.

Before Harry could answer, Minerva broke in, “Really, Lucius, the question has nothing to do with the present situation. Besides, your intrusion into Potter's personal relations is unwarranted!”

Lucius looked McGonagall up and down, before retorting in his silky voice, “While he may feel safe around you, Minerva, I am not sure his well-being is guaranteed in the hands of the woman who couldn't protect her own family!”, sneered Lucius.

Minerva fumed and opened her mouth, but before she could respond, Harry had replied, icy disdain in his voice, “While I greatly appreciate your concern, I have been honoured to have Prof. McGonagall's protection and help, Mr. Malfoy. If I feel the need to obtain any additional protection, I shall contact you – or Ms. Skeeter.” Lucius's sneer deepened at Harry's words, while Minerva's head snapped towards the boy next to her, her eyes boring into his frame. There was something cold and terrifying about Potter's words. While his words had been decorous and grave, they held the lash of a whip and the ruthlessness of the grave behind them. There was a moment's silence – pregnant and awkward.

“Very well, Albus. Thank you for your time. As chairwoman of the board, I declare that the meeting is concluded,” announced Augusta in a very final tone, breaking the silence.

Slowly, all of them filed out of the meeting place. Minerva took Harry's hand and gently led him out of the chambers. Out of earshot, Harry paused, “Professor, what was that about the Longbottoms being tortured?”

Minerva shook her head, “It is not my story to tell, Harry.” She looked intently at the raven haired boy, “Take my advice and be sensitive in this matter. It concerns not only persons who are now incapacitated, but also feelings of people who are here at Hogwarts. Be cautious!”

“I will, Professor. Thank you for your kindness. I'd like to go down to lunch.” Minerva nodded, and Harry descended the stairs towards the Great Hall.

--(End of the Chapter)--

## The Roaring Snake – 16

### Expansions and Plans

(Author's Notes: Many incidents leave unintended consequences in their wake. By merely surviving against the troll, Harry has done more than enough to make some of the high and the mighty of the wizarding world take notice. The realisation that Harry is not merely a lucky creature who managed to survive the Dark Lord, but a forceful and resourceful person in his own right is beginning to sink in. People are willing to go to some length to ensure that Harry is at least neutral about them. That is the theme examined in this chapter.

Harry shows he is no novice when it comes to diplomacy. But, Harry, being a genuinely nice person, his diplomacy is more an expression of his true nature.

One also sees Narcissa showing her calibre when it comes to politics and manipulation, and why she is to be feared. Cissy has her own plans as well.

Thanks to AbstractError for helping me write the financial part of Cissy's manipulations and the Harry-Cissy scene. Thanks to Voice of the Nephilim for his insightful remarks and his suggestions for the Harry-Rosier scene. Finally, Thanks to ParseltonguePhoenix for his thoroughness in verifying the material.

As usual, all criticism is welcome)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am merely playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

Harry descended from the meeting with a thoughtful face. McGonagall had asked him to accept Granger into his group. Harry had no objection to that – however, the proposed expansion had given him some ideas. Conveniently, Harry's group had been shunned by everyone since they tended to spend more time with other members of the group, rather than their own house mates.

There was no real hostility towards Harry's group, but neither did anyone waste any love on them. Consequently, Harry and his friends would sometimes sit at the Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw tables for their meals, but most often, they would just pick up their food and leave to eat either outside, or in an unused classroom. On this particular day, when Harry suggested that they eat away from the ears of the other students, it raised no eyebrows. Once they had been seated comfortably in a classroom, Harry narrated his experience at the meeting of the Governors. At length, he spoke almost distantly, "What do you all think of our group?"

"What do you mean?". It was Susan Bones who spoke.

Harry chose his words delicately. "I've been observing the grades carefully. It's basically people from our group that're at the top in every class, except History. In fact, with the exception of Malfoy in Potions, Nott in Astronomy, and History, MacDougal in Defence, and Granger in everything except Defence, we've got the top three spots in all subjects. I was wondering if we should invite Granger back."

There was dead silence for a moment, before Harry continued, "But listen, all of you. Anyone invited will be only with the consent of everyone in the group. I'm just making a suggestion."

Rosier remarked, his voice precise, icy and distant as ever. "Granger was invited. She chose to leave. Why do you want to invite her again?"

Harry returned, "McGonagall asked me to consider her. Apparently, she's not been getting along well with her House mates." In a few words, he told them of his chat with McGonagall and her request. He finished, "I would be grateful to you all if you could give her another chance." Of course, what Harry didn't tell the others was that the muggleborn girl's predicament mirrored his own in the muggle world. He could remember how everyone mocked and shunned him, looked down on him. His sympathy for the girl was not altruistic. All too well could he understand the shame, the loneliness, the derision, the cruelty, and the agony of the life she would have to lead if she left alone. Harry was not a cruel person, nor did he like to see or cause suffering. In his own way, he wished to alleviate people's distress.

Daphne remarked acutely, “Does she want to join, Harry, or does McGonagall want it?”

“Well, I assume that McGonagall has talked to Granger to ascertain her wishes”, replied Harry.

Kind hearted Susan agreed immediately, “I vote we give her another chance, Harry.” She continued musingly, “I wonder if that's why Granger wanted to speak to you alone a couple of days ago.”

Millicent and Justin concurred with Susan, and Tony followed suit. Daphne and Sakarbal had neither agreed nor disagreed, when Harry prompted them, “Well?”

The two purebloods exchanged a quick glance. Daphne shrugged indifferently, while Sakarbal murmured, “If you want this, Harry, we'll not oppose it. Yet, I'm not too sure about her.”

“Neither am I, Sak, neither am I”, replied Harry heavily, looking into the distance.

--(Scene Break)--

Harry Potter had wasted no time once he got the approval from his other friends to invite Hermione. The next day, after transfiguration, he hailed Hermione Granger, and led her to an empty classroom.

He whispered, “Hermione, I'm sorry.”

“For what?”, required a startled Hermione.

“For not seeing how unhappy you've been the last few weeks. Had I known what you were going through, I would have tried to help you much earlier. As it was, I was too caught up in other things to see what was happening to you.”

Hermione didn't trust herself to speak. Her mind was a whirl of emotions. Gratitude, hope, and fear warred in her mind, as Harry

continued, staring hard into her eyes, "I'd like to invite you to study with us. If you're willing, you're more than welcome to join my group."

In the meantime, fear had won out among in the free-for-all battle in Hermione's mind. A second rejection would break her heart, even if the person who was offering her hope was the object of her gratitude. Deciding to ascertain Harry's intentions, she demanded curiously, "What makes you think I'm unhappy?"

"McGonagall told me", he answered simply. Hermione turned scarlet, but Harry added quickly, "Don't think badly of her. She means to help you – and all she told me is that you were very unhappy in Gryffindor." He blurted out, "I must have been blind to miss something so obvious." He took her hand in his own, "I speak on behalf of not only myself, but also my group. My friends and I wish to make it up to you, Hermione. Please consider joining us. We'd be happy to have you working with us!"

Hermione was more grateful to Harry Potter than she could express. He was offering her hope – something she badly needed. "So you're inviting me to the House of Potter?", smiled Hermione, her lips quirking in a small smile. The House of Potter was the prim name given to Potter and his friends, while the more cynical called them Potter's slaves or even less flattering appellations – particularly the females of the group were the victims of the more cruel epithets.

"Yes, yes, I suppose I am."

"Thanks, Harry. I won't let you down."

--(Scene Break)--

Narcissa Black-Malfoy stretched out her feet towards the fire, her coffee cup in her hand. Opposite her, sat her husband, his brows knotted, and his face resembling a thundercloud. Lucius always flew off the handle when things didn't go his way, and from the look on his visage, it was obvious that things were going badly for the Malfoy patriarch. Breakfast had been served in the Malfoy Manor, and the elves had just cleared away the table when Narcissa remarked neutrally, "Anything worrying you, Lucius?"

Lucius replied coldly, "Nothing in particular."

"Then tell me about it!", smiled Narcissa fondly.

Lucius' frown deepened for a moment, but he relaxed. "I see there's no use denying that I am annoyed. As for what's irritating me – well, it's yesterday's meeting. Potter, I'm afraid, is as stubborn and meddlesome as his parents."

"I see", replied Narcissa, a frown creasing her pale face. "What do you plan to do about it?"

"Nothing. He can lick that old' goat's boots!"

Narcissa stirred, worry creasing her face for the first time, "Has he joined Dumbledore?"

"I don't quite know. All I know is that he's unhappy with us. In fact, he's quite hostile and contemptuous."

"Hardly surprising", murmured Cissy.

"I beg your pardon!". Lucius' voice was at its intimidating best, but his wife was unimpressed. She remarked in a carefully neutral tone, "We sent Skeeter after him, violated his privacy, and Draco has been annoying him the last few months." She continued thoughtfully, "I wonder if he also knows about our supporting the Dark Lord the last time over."

"He cannot know!", interrupted Lucius. "He may suspect, but there's only surmise and conjecture!"

"Quite", responded Cissy unruffled. "Consequently, we have a chance to persuade him to work with us."

"I'll wish you luck!", sneered Lucius. "But yestereve, the boor mocked and dismissed me out of hand! Let's see if you can do anything with his arrogance!"

Narcissa continued unhurriedly, “Perhaps you've been approaching him the wrong way, Lucius. Perhaps you should try to find out where he needs help.”

“And how, oh divinely wise one, would you proceed with that?”

“I've got a plan”, replied Narcissa calmly, a knowing, limpid smile on her lips. In a few words, she proceeded to elaborate on her scheme. Lucius listened in silence. Her plan, he clearly perceived, was at least well thought out and coherent. But it was full of pitfalls. To manage to subtly influence such a diverse set of people as Cissy was contemplating took diplomacy and tact of the highest calibre. However, there was no denying that the fruits of success in the enterprise would be enormous. Finally, he answered, “But why are you so fixated on Potter? He's just a figurehead. Severus swears that he's nothing special. He's just a naïve child with an inflated sense of self-worth!”

Narcissa returned equably, “Severus is quite blind when it comes to Potters. Look at the facts, Lucius – Potter was taken by surprise and left to fend for himself against a troll. He triumphed against those odds and trapped the beast. Don't you see how remarkable that is? I don't perceive the swollen headed fool that Severus is so fond of regaling us about. I only see a powerful and worthy ally in the last scion of the Potters.” She rose and took her husband's hand in her own, before proceeding, “Finally, Lucy, if we don't win over Potter, others will. The boy's influence remains intact. Should Dumbledore manage to win Potter's confidence ...”, her voice trailed away. Lucius didn't need his wife to complete the sentence. Keeping Dumbledore alone at bay had been hard enough. If Potter and Dumbledore united, the old man would nearly be unstoppable. That would never do. He shook himself from his reverie as Cissy pursued, “Listen, Lucius. We already have the support of the more conservative purebloods – the Averys, the Parkinsons, the MacNairs, the Carrows and the Yaxleys. But we have seen how woefully inadequate that power base is in dislodging Dumbledore. We need to expand and our best chance is to attract the purebloods who are willing to help Potter. People might be unwilling to work with us, but when it comes to assisting Potter, they are more likely to be amenable. Continue working on your

present plans. Just avoid harming or annoying Potter and his friends personally. In the meantime, I will work to help Potter.”

“And what happens if you are unsuccessful in your efforts to woo Potter?”

“We shall have lost very little. But, in the meantime, it will be beneficial. With us apparently divided, it will also throw confusion into our enemy ranks. Finally, we should be prepared for every eventuality. It is a good idea not to put our faith in one faction. No matter which faction wins, we shall have our interests secured!”

“And what if Dumbledore wins completely?”

“In that case, Lucius, we shall all be dead and being dead, the outcome will trouble us little.” The terrifying calmness in his wife's voice sent shivers down Lucius spine, as considered his wife's proposition carefully. Finally, he placed his hand on her shoulder as he replied, “Very well, Cissy. I trust you. Go ahead with your scheduled programme.”

--(Scene Break)--

Sakarbal Rosier was standing with a pensive expression in front of the Common Room fire, having just finished a chat with Narcissa Black-Malfoy. The information just given him by his godmother had astonished him no end. Surely what auntie Cissa averred could not be true? Nevertheless, every fact he had come across told him that Narcissa's opinion was indeed correct. He shook himself out of his reverie – he would put the offer before Harry Potter and let the Boy-Who-Lived decide.

The next morning, he sought out Harry during a break, and spoke without preamble. “Harry, will you answer a question honestly?”

Harry was startled. “What about?”

“Are you happy with the muggles you live with?”

Harry's lips tightened and his eyes blazed, but Rosier continued hurriedly, "Please don't get angry, Harry. Answer me the question and I will tell you why I am prying so boorishly."

Harry restrained his anger with an effort. "No", he snapped succinctly.

Rosier nodded as if it was that was what he had expected. He explained, "Last night, I had a talk with Lady Malfoy. She proposed a plan to make your life better ..."

Harry opened his mouth to furiously contest this intervention in his life, but Rosier held up a hand to silence him. "Let me explain her plan, Harry. You can give your opinion after you've heard her message out."

Harry shut his mouth with an audible click. "Go on", he rasped. Rapidly, clearly and concisely, Rosier explained the plan Narcissa had proposed. When he had finished narrating the idea, Harry was gaping in shock. The audacity of the Malfoys had no bounds. Ere he could make this clear, Rosier continued, "Harry, she offers guarantees about not interfering in your life or decisions. She will swear an unbreakable vow not to choose your path for you, or attempt to coerce into toeing the Malfoy family line. She also promises that any decision that affects you personally will be taken only with your express consent. Finally, she offers to bring in Mme. Bones, Lady Priscilla, and my mother as other trustees of the scheme she is proposing. They will stand guarantors of your control over your own life."

Harry was open-mouthed in astonishment. This was totally unexpected. A thousand questions swirled in his mind, but the foremost was why anyone would spend millions on him. He bluntly asked Rosier as much. Rosier answered thoughtfully, "I've asked myself the same question a hundred times. I'm sure many of auntie Cissa's reasons have escaped me, but my own family and Daphne's family would help you principally because of what we owe your father." Harry looked questioningly at the cold-eyed boy, who sighed sadly and explained, "The last war was madness. Many of us purebloods supported neither side, but we were all under pressure to declare our allegiances. There was no safety for us in the country.

Your father helped my parents and Daphne's parents escape. My parents, Daphne's parents, Regulus Black, Narcissa Malfoy, Rabastan Lestrange and so many others are alive today only because of his efforts." He stopped his pacing, and gazed earnestly into Harry's eyes, "We really wish to help you."

Harry did not doubt Sakarbal's word. However, he protested, "But this scheme would cost millions ..."

That money is just trivial to us. Any of the richer pureblood families could come up with the kind of money from pocket change."

"If I refuse this ...," began Harry.

"You refuse and that is all there is to it. We go on as before." Rosier's voice was preternaturally calm.

"You wouldn't resent it?"

Rosier shook his head. "It's your life, Harry. Others may suggest, they may help, but it is you who have to live with your choices. I cannot speak for everyone, but I can speak for Daphne and myself. As long as you don't turn into another Dark Lord, we will help you as far as possible."

"What do you think, Sak? Is this a fair deal?"

Rosier shrugged, "The deal seems to be a fair one. No one has managed to break an unbreakable vow in the history of this planet. And yet, I am almost certain that Narcissa has other motives of her own for helping you."

Harry looked out into the fog of the November morning. The whole episode was no clearer than the mist outside. His first instinct was to take the safe course – to refuse. Indeed, he could almost hear Hermione urging him to refuse the risk. However, he was also painfully aware that if he refused the offer, he was most unlikely to discover Narcissa's motives. To understand the Malfoys, he would have to accept the offer. This was a glorious opportunity to get a view into Narcissa's thoughts. The adventurer in Harry was urging him to

accept the peril. It was a risk, it was true, but a calculated one of which there were many in life. He would be walking into the danger with his eyes open, with his friends to support him. He was reasonably confident that he would be able to weather the storm, if there was one at all. He turned to Rosier, with a thoughtful expression on his face. "I accept in principle, but I want a talk with Lady Malfoy before I agree."

Rosier nodded curtly, "That can be arranged."

"When?"

"No time like the present."

--(Scene Break)--

Lady Narcissa was seated in front of her fire, a book in her hand when an excited elf rushed in to announce that Sakarbal Rosier was calling her via the floo. Intrigued, Narcissa rose and made her way to the drawing room. Rosier's face cheerfully called from the fireplace, "Bonsoir, tante Cissa!"

Narcissa's lips relaxed into a genuine smile at the sight of her godson, "Bonsoir! Comment allez-vous?"

"Tres bien, merci", responded Rosier before he relapsed into English. "Harry is here, auntie Cissa, and he would like to speak to you."

"Very well. If you would be so kind .."

Rosier stepped aside, allowing Harry to speak to the Malfoy matriarch. Some polite formalities were exchanged, before Harry thanked her for the offer, and bluntly questioned her reasons. Narcissa was amused. She had considered so many possibilities – Harry rejecting her offer, Harry accepting her offer, Harry running to McGonagall for advice, and so on. It had not occurred to her that he might approach her directly for answers. It showed his mettle, his willingness to get to close grips with an unknown quantity, and his openness to ideas. So many qualities that were reminiscent of James ... She shook herself out of her reverie, and wondered what to tell him. Rosier had warned her not to lie to Harry about anything, and Narcissa implicitly trusted

her godson's judgement on that score. She would tell Potter as much of the truth as she could without endangering her own schemes.

She sighed, "Harry, your question is not easy to answer. There are two main reasons. The first one is a matter of principle. You are a wizard, the son of a pureblood family as old as any. Pureblood families almost always take care of their own." Seeing that Harry did not comprehend her statement, she explained, "Harry, muggles have long disliked and distrusted magic. Therefore, wizarding families, most of which are related by blood ties, have a system by which any child of a wizarding family will be adopted by others at need. This way, we can raise the child in an environment that affords it care and affection, and just as important, that the child is taught to understand and accept its powers, and not fear them."

"Why, then, was I placed with the Dursleys?"

"Dumbledore", responded Narcissa sadly. "He decreed that you should grow up with the muggles. He was your custodian and entitled to act as he saw fit."

"And the wizarding families let him do it?", queried Harry sceptically.

Narcissa debated how to answer it. She knew many bits of information second hand, and had heard of Dumbledore's manipulations to get custody of Harry, but the truth would be better accepted and more credible if Harry discovered it on his own. Consequently, she replied with just her personal knowledge, "I don't know. I wasn't in the country at the time. From what I have heard, however, people did indeed challenge Dumbledore's guardianship and his propriety of leaving you with those muggles. Their efforts could, however, achieve little."

Harry digested the fact. He would have to research this. "You mentioned two reasons. What is the second?"

"Your father, Harry. It is because of his efforts that I am alive today." Seeing Harry opening his mouth to question, she interrupted, "No, don't ask me for the details. But you may take my word that I owe him

a lot. I would never purpose anything to the hurt of the son of James Potter!"

Harry nodded – what Narcissa had told him agreed with what Rosier had told him. He would discreetly research the matter and ask McGonagall some questions about it. Consequently, he nodded, "Thank you, ma'am. I accept your offer with one condition."

"And what is it?"

"That Prof. McGonagall be one of the trustees of the scheme you are proposing – if she is agreeable, that is."

"That is perfectly understandable, Harry. I've no objections to having Minerva on the board. It is your job to convince her, however!"

Harry thanked her again and bade goodbye to Lady Malfoy.

--(Scene Break)--

Just outside the village of St. Mary Mead1 – or Mary Mead as the wizards called it, for the irreligious spirit of the wizards disdained heavenly hierarchies even as it embraced earthly ones – appeared a tall woman, with blond hair. Purposefully, Narcissa swiftly strode toward a large building. Having obtained the approval from Harry, she was keen to complete the task while the iron was hot, and before Potter changed his mind. She rapped at a door which bore the sign 'Grunnings Drill Makers', and entered. From behind a small desk adjacent the door, came the mechanical voice of a receptionist as Cissy entered, "How may I help you, ma'am?"

"I would like to speak to manager Tomlinson", answered the blond haired woman coldly.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but he's in a meeting. Perhaps if you tried tomorrow ...", the automaton was speaking in her usual passionless voice.

The tall lady had already opened her purse and drawn out a small card. On its back, she scribbled a few words, and handed it to the girl

at the desk. "Please give this to him immediately", she commanded. "This is very important!"

The girl read the card – the name, Lady Crale meant nothing to her, or as far as she knew, to her boss. Therefore, she was debating mentally whether to obey the domineering stranger or her superior, when the imperious voice came again, this time icy fury apparent in her ringing tones, "The meeting he'll be having with me is the most important meeting he's had in his career. Give my message to him now, or you'll be out of your job tomorrow!" The ruthlessness in the voice decided the issue for the girl. She had seen many intimidating people, but this one beat all of them hands down. She positively fled down the hallway towards a locked door. Narcissa permitted herself a small smile. It was often useful to put muggles in place, especially when they were insolent towards their betters. Haughtily leaning an arm against the desk, she awaited the arrival of the manager.

A few minutes later, she was joined by a tall and well-built man. "Lady Crale?", he inquired. "I'm John Tomlinson." 'Lady Crale' inclined her head perfunctorily, waiting for him to continue. John Tomlinson was used to visitors gushing their business quickly. Consequently, he waited in silence if the woman would state her business. However, here was a woman who seemed supremely comfortable in an alien environment, showing no signs of impatience. She continued to stare at him frigidly and disdainfully, and he felt as if he were a child that had been caught stealing cookies. Sighing in defeat, he smiled, "Please follow me, ma'am. We can talk in my office."

Narcissa followed the manager, her gait regal, her eyes chips of steel and her head held high. Here was a queen wont to have others do her bidding with no questions asked.

The manager waved her into a chair, before seating himself behind his desk. He smiled, "How may I help you, ma'am?"

The woman drew a paper from her handbag, "Your current debt-equity ratio is 70:30. Your present cash flows can cover 90 of the net interest on the debts. You have several bubble payments coming up in the next few months. All in all, you are cash strapped, even though your company has some promising prospects. Is that correct?"

Tomlinson nodded silently, wondering where all this was leading to. Narcissa continued, "In the short term, your credit rating has been falling and will continue to fall. Your sources of credit are drying up rather rapidly", she smiled cruelly.

"I fail to see what ...". Tomlinson was holding his temper in check with some effort. This woman has some gall to come to him with the information about the debts. However, there was an indeterminate quality about the blond visitor that prevented him from crossing the boundary into rudeness."

"It may interest you to know that I've acquired all your debts." She drew a bundle of papers from her handbag and tossed them down on the table. "You'll find all the papers here!"

Suddenly, John Tomlinson's mouth went dry. He thanked his stars that he had been polite with the lady. The issue was much more serious now. "You've bought the debts, ma'am?"

"Precisely, Mr. Tomlinson, I have some serious concerns about the company."

The manager said nothing, but looked at the lady nervously, as she continued, "Frankly, Mr. Tomlinson, I'm revolted about financing companies whose employees indulge in child abuse!" The woman's voice was hard as steel, and the aura of menace that she radiated made the manager shudder.

"I assure you our employees are carefully screened ..."

Narcissa's finger tapped warningly on the desk, "Be careful, Mr. Tomlinson! I know what I know!"

"But, ma'am, ..."

She ignored his protest as she continued, anger and revulsion vibrating in her voice. "In light of your employees' barbarity, I've decided to foreclose the debts!"

The manager's lips had gone white, his skin the colour of putty. "You – you can't do that!", he spluttered.

"Oh! Can't I?", smiled the woman maliciously.

"B-but ma'am, surely, ..."

"I have positive information that one of your employees, a Vernon Dursley, is mistreating and abusing his nephew, Mr. Harry Potter. Consequently, I have decided that, under no circumstances, can I be associated with a company that is complicit in the abuse of a child!"

"This shall be rectified. We shall call in the police. Vernon Dursley shall be fired immediately with extreme prejudice. We shall ..", babbled Tomlinson breathlessly.

"I see your social conscience has not atrophied as far as I had feared it had," remarked Narcissa bitingly.

The manager flinched as if she had slapped him in the face. "We shall act immediately. We'd never condone child abuse. Vernon Dursley shall be fired immediately." He looked hopefully at Narcissa, "Perhaps, ma'am, you'll reconsider your decision to foreclose the loans?"

"If I see your earnestness in acting against such despicable deeds, I may be indeed persuaded not to have recourse to extreme measures." Narcissa spoke not kindly, rather with an icily repressed anger. "If things are settled to my satisfaction in this affair, that is." In a few words, she described the compromise she desired. John Tomlinson bowed in token of his acceptance and sent for Vernon Dursley.

A few minutes later, Dursley, a puce faced pig of a man, was ushered into the presence of his manager. Tomlinson spoke without prelude, "Mr. Dursley, we have some concerns about your conduct. Particularly your behaviour towards your nephew!"

Vernon's face turned purple. He had carefully avoided all mention of his nephew's existence at his workplace. How did Tomlinson know

about the boy? Tomlinson gave him no chance to recover, "It has come to our notice that the boy has been shamefully mistreated by you and your family. Your atrocious conduct reflects on the integrity and honour of our company. Consequently, we have decided that the company's oversight shall extend to Mr. Potter's welfare!"

"You've got no right ...", spluttered Vernon Dursley, but Tomlinson cut him off neatly, "Mr. Dursley, you've got no choice in this matter! I shall be personally interviewing the boy regularly to make sure that he has what he needs. If it comes to my notice that he is in any way abused by you, your contract shall be terminated with extreme prejudice, and the company will invite the police to investigate your treatment of the boy!"

"The boy is a liar. We've taken good care ...", blustered Dursley, only to have Tomlinson thunder at him, "Dursley, our actions are the mildest that your despicable behaviour merits!" He leaned forward, "Consent to this arrangement and give the boy a decent life, and no one needs to know of this arrangement. Violate the covenant, and you'll lose every penny you have! What do you say?"

What could Vernon say? To be bullied and humiliated like this! He cursed the boy for being alive, he damned the Potters for dying off and leaving him with this burden, he mentally muttered imprecations about the old man for saddling him with this problem. Oh – how he wished to wring that wretched boy's neck!

Unnoticed by Vernon, Narcissa had been watching him closely. She could almost read the muggle's thoughts – Vernon Dursley was an emotional billboard, after all. Before Vernon could reply, she spoke, "Mr. Tomlinson, perhaps you could give me a few minutes alone with Mr. Dursley?"

"Certainly, ma'am." Narcissa waited until Tomlinson was out of the door, and then sealed and silenced the room with a couple of flicks of her wand. Vernon Dursley had been nervously following the manoeuvres of the woman. He gasped, "So you're one of them?"

Narcissa arched an elegant eyebrow. "One of whom?"

"Those freaks", muttered Vernon. Narcissa's patience was at an end, as she pointed her wand at him, cold contempt in her voice, "Listen, you obnoxious, overbearing muggle! I own the entire debt of your company! Don't even think of taking out your anger on Potter! I have made arrangements to find out everyday he stays at your house, if Harry is okay. Should I suspect, far less know, that anything is amiss with him, I shall call on you. It will be a pleasure to exterminate your ilk!"

Vernon had recovered some of his courage. "Bah!", he sneered. "That Doubleboor fellow promised me he would keep all of your kind away from me .."

Narcissa mentally filed away that information for future use. Aloud, she raged, "You utter idiot! Have you any clue what you've done? Didn't that old man tell you that Potter is a celebrity in our world? Neither Dumbledore, nor anyone else will be able to save you, nor will they attempt to if harm befalls Harry Potter. You will be torn apart limb from limb if you are lucky. If what you have already done to poor Harry is known in general, half of this country will be baying for your blood! Stick to the agreement your supervisor suggested, and you'll be no worse than before. Disregard it, and you'll find yourself dead and your wife and children in the streets!"

Vernon was utterly terrified by her menace of her aura and her ruthlessness. It turned his soul to water; it froze the marrow in his spine. He felt his skin roughening like a dog's; he sought in vain to dissemble the terror glaring from his eyes. Narcissa gave a cold short laugh, terrible as a note of doom, She leaned forward, and pointed her wand at his face, and hissed, "You'll protect Harry Potter and give him a decent life. Refuse this offer and you will learn the true meaning of pain. Many of us would be only too glad to teach you that!" Green sparks had flickered from her wand at her words. "Do we have an agreement?"

Vernon saw that he was completely trapped. Seeing no other way out of the hole, he bit out, "Yes!"

--(Scene Break)--

Four formidable women were gathered in a Georgian manor on the Cornish coast. The eldest of the four, Minerva McGonagall, muttered, "I hope Narcissa's got a good reason to make me lose my afternoon."

"We shall find out soon", replied the slender Priscilla tranquilly.

Sharp at the hour named, the graceful and elegant Narcissa Black-Malfoy appeared in Rosier mansion. Tea was served, and Narcissa broached the subject of her visit calmly, "I've called everyone here to discuss Harry Potter's home life – more accurately, what we can do to make things better for him."

Berenice stared, "Explain yourself, Cissy."

"Minerva could do it better than me", smiled Narcissa tightly.

McGonagall flushed, "I fail to see what it has to do with you."

Narcissa's eyebrows arched elegantly. "I would have thought that Potter would have explained things to you?"

"He explained your plan", answered Minerva neutrally. "He is the only reason that I even agreed to be here today. I am not convinced of your motives. I question your reasons, even if you are offering guarantees!"

Narcissa smiled coldly. "I shall answer that. For the benefit of the others, I will explain everything with your permission."

Minerva nodded and in a few words, Narcissa spoke of how she had deduced that Harry was having an unhappy life with the muggles and how she had decided to do something about it. She then spoke of how she had bought the debt of Harry Potter's uncle's company and how she had coerced the management into cooperating in giving Harry reasonable living conditions.

"Impressive as your financial and diplomatic manoeuvres are, how does this concern us?", questioned Priscilla.

“I intend to put Harry Potter as the owner of the company debt. As he is currently a minor, I suggest that it be put in a trust in his name with the five of us being the trustees!”

This was so utterly unexpected that all the others, except Minerva who was already aware of it, gaped at her. No pureblood etiquette could have prepared them for the scale of the shock, and they were staring unabashedly at the Malfoy matriarch. There was a long awkward silence at the pronouncement. Finally, Priscilla protested weakly, “Cissy, it probably cost you millions ..”

“Be reasonable, Priscilla. I could have bought that entire company, leave alone the debt, out of pocket change. So could you, or any of us here. I have spoken to Potter about it. If Potter does not like such an expensive gift, he can even buy it from us once he comes of age, if he so wishes. But monetary concerns aside, have you any objections to my proposal?”

There was another silence at this. It was obvious that none of them could make any coherent criticisms of the plan proposed by Narcissa. Priscilla and Berenice were utterly apolitical and consequently, they would not bother about Narcissa's political schemes as long as she did not harm Harry. However, the same didn't hold true for Amelia, while Minerva had an even more serious problem – was Cissy's offer a snare? She was most suspicious of the Malfoys, even if Narcissa herself had never been known to harm anyone. Amelia questioned bluntly, “Narcissa, what do you hope to achieve through this scheme? You're not doing this from the kindness of your heart, are you?”

“I owe James Potter a great favour, Amelia”, replied Narcissa wearily.

“Does Lucius know of the scheme?”, pursued Amelia quietly.

“He will not stop me.”

“How can you be so sure? There was little love lost between James and Lucius. Will he consent to helping a Potter?” Minerva was at her interrogatory best.

"Lucius may be many things, but he is not a barbarian!", snapped back Narcissa. "He will not grudge Potter a decent home life."

"Why are you making us this offer?", inquired Amelia.

Narcissa sighed wearily, "It was Potter's suggestion, really. Harry Potter does not trust me. I can't blame him, considering some of Lucius' follies. He agreed to my plan if you – Minerva in particular – stood guarantors of the scheme."

"And that is your reason for approaching us?", questioned Amelia Bones doubtfully.

"You have my word of honour that my primary concern is to aid Harry Potter."

The other four exchanged significant glances. While they did not believe that Narcissa had no other reasons for trying to make Harry's home life better, they were all agreed that the muggle guardians of Potter had to be restrained. With the four of them holding equal voting rights, they could keep Narcissa from leading Harry astray. Consequently, they agreed to the Malfoy matriarch's proposal. Berenice asked, "When do you plan to give this to Harry?"

"At Yule. It should make him a good festive present."

--(End of the Chapter)--

1Try to guess where this name comes from. Fans of detective novels should be able to trace its source without any trouble.

## The Roaring Snake – 17

### Post-Halloween

(Author's Note: From here onwards, things become hotter for Potter. Too many conflicting interests which will brook no refusal from Harry mean that Harry will have to be very circumspect in his actions. However, for the first time in the year, the initiative is out of his hands. Thus far, Harry was dictating events, and others were in observation mode. Now, with roles reversed, it will be a test of Harry's patience, perseverance, character and mettle to survive the manipulations of the others.

Narcissa plays a good hand once more. She shows why she is the equal of the old man when it comes to guile and deceit.

Thanks to my beta readers – Voice of the Nephilim, AbstractError and ParseltonguePhoenix.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I'm just playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

Once Minerva and Amelia had left the Rosier home, the Malfoy matriarch murmured, “Nous commençons bien. Mais il y a beaucoup du chemin à faire (1).”

Priscilla raised her eyebrows questioningly, and Narcissa sighed, “My plan, Prissie, has some obvious flaws. I need the assistance of both Niki and yourself to help Harry effectively.”

“What do you mean by that?” questioned Priscilla.

Narcissa explained, “During my conversation with the muggle, he made a very illuminating remark. He informed me that he was safe from all of us because Dumbledore would keep the wizarding world from the Dursleys.”

“Explain clearly, Cissy”, returned Berenice curtly.

Narcissa explained briefly her threats to the muggle and his assurance that Dumbledore would keep him safe, no matter how he treated Harry. She finished, “Now that the old man's protection has been breached, I assume the muggle will run back to Dumbledore and complain bitterly about the threats to his person and family.”

Priscilla and Berenice exchanged a quick glance. Priscilla remarked, “You think the muggle will run to the old man?”

“I am certain Dumbledore knows of the threats, and will have surmised the rest of our plan by now”, replied Narcissa coolly. “Look at things from that muggle's point of view. For ten years, he has been mistreating Harry without fear of repercussions. Now he gets dire threats from wizards – a group of people he despises. Oh yes – the muggle despises our kind, Niki”, interposed Narcissa seeing her cousin-in-law's attempt to contest her point about Vernon.

“And Dumbledore put Potter, his golden child, in the care of a man who hates the boy?” asked Priscilla sceptically.

“It surprised me as well”, admitted Narcissa, “but there it is.”

“Okay, we will leave that point aside now. Assuming you are right and the old man knows of our plan by now, what can he do?” asked Priscilla.

“Well – I can conceive of three possibilities”, returned Narcissa. “Dumbledore is unlikely to keep Potter either at Hogwarts, or at his own home. They would hamper the old man's activities over summer and further, his friends can insist on visiting Harry at Hogwarts or at the old man's place. Dumbledore would be damned if he did and damned if he didn't. Besides, Dumbledore is the chessmaster and it is not for the chessmaster to become a piece on the board. However, he has other options. First, he can relocate Potter to a more securely guarded location. In other words, he would put Potter in the care of people who are utterly loyal to him. The Weasleys and the

MacMillans come to mind. But Potter, I am told, is none too friendly with these children.”

Berenice and Priscilla nodded, as Narcissa continued, “Correct me if I am wrong. Harry Potter’s circle of friends consists of Daphne Greengrass, Sakarbal Rosier, Anthony Goldstein, Millicent Bulstrode, Susan Bones and a couple of muggleborn children. Dumbledore certainly won’t place Harry with any of the purebloods or the half-bloods in his group. None are under the old man’s influence. However, he may try to put Harry with one of the muggleborn children. This is his second option. However, this choice I regard as unlikely. The old coot likes to have full control of Potter and putting him with muggle-born students is not a good way for him. Besides, the most problematic part of both the above scenarios would be the questions he would have to face about the wisdom of Harry’s placement with the muggles in the first place. Dumbledore might be attacked over the inappropriateness of his original choice, and his subsequent discovery of the mistake ten years later.”

Berenice and Priscilla exchanged a quick glance. Narcissa had done her homework thoroughly. “What is his final choice?” inquired Berenice.

“His final and best choice is to put Harry back with those muggles and find a way to prevent Harry from communicating with anyone outside. He could also adopt sterner measures to prevent us from communicating with Harry or visiting him. That would save him the embarrassment of having to answer questions about the propriety of his placement of Potter, while achieving his own goals.”

“How do you know what his goals are?” challenged Priscilla.

“I don’t”, admitted Narcissa. “However, his goals – whatever they are – required keeping all wizards from Potter for the first ten years of his life. There is nothing to indicate that this aspect of his plan has changed.”

“Okay, Cissy”, answered Berenice. “Let’s assume that you’re indeed right about Dumbledore’s choices. How can we help?”

“There are several things we can do. First thing is to invite him for Yule. Priscilla can do that via Daphne. Second – Harry Potter is small and malnourished for his age.” Priscilla acknowledged the truth of the remark with a short nod, as Narcissa proceeded with her explanation, “Priscilla can make sure that he is actually healthy and has not suffered any damage.”

“I see no problem about that”, replied Priscilla Lestrange-Greengrass.

Narcissa voiced, “Second – I am almost certain that the old man is keeping tabs on Potter continuously. The risk of Harry Potter being in imminent danger – either from those muggles or from others – cannot have been overlooked. There must be some foolproof way of monitoring Potter continually.”

“There are several long term tracking charms”, answered her cousin-in-law with a frown. “Any of them would be perfectly satisfactory for the old man's purpose. I assume you want me to check him for any tracking charms?”

“If you would be so kind, Niki”, murmured Narcissa.

“Consider it done. Personally, I would also like to have checked the muggle's home for some kind of post and messenger charm wards. Would that be possible?”, asked Lady Rosier.

“It might be, but Dumbledore would only be alerted about our direct intervention. As it is, I assume he has some wizard-repelling wards at the muggle's home. Can you think of a failsafe method to keep in touch with Potter at all times? Something that will allow us to contact him in an emergency, and vice versa?”

“That can be arranged”, replied Berenice Rookwood-Rosier in a thoughtful, but determined tone. “It will not be easy, but with some luck, I think it can be arranged.” She added, as a sudden thought struck her, “I say, Emmanuel Goldstein's son is a friend of Potter, is he not?”

“True”, nodded both Priscilla and Narcissa.

"Leave the communications with Potter to me. I know how to handle it."

"Excellent", commented Narcissa appreciatively. "That will be all for now." She rose to her feet, "We shall meet soon. Prissie, Niki – I have the honour to wish you all a very good evening." Lady Narcissa Black-Malfoy included both the others in a sweeping bow, tossed a pinch of floo into the fire, and disappeared in a whoosh of flame. The other two women exchanged a glance. Priscilla gave voice to the feelings of both the women, "Nothing about Harry Potter is clear or easy."

The other nodded, "Well, we'd better start preparing to help the kid." A bitter smile crossed her lips, as she murmured, "Cissy thinks very much in the same way as the old coot, does she not?"

"No wonder she is a very successful politician", returned Priscilla drily. Waving cheerfully at her old friend, she left the Rosier mansion for her own home.

--(Scene Break)--

"Harry, you can't be serious!" interjected Hermione, when she had learnt of Harry's intention to return to Quirrell's special classes. The others had filled in Hermione about what they had deduced about the events at Halloween. As Hermione admonished Harry, she turned and saw that Daphne, Millicent, Justin, and Susan had been similarly disapproving of Harry's proposed course of action.

"Hermione, if I stop going to his classes, it will amount to telling him I suspect him. We can't afford that!"

"We can't afford you putting yourself in pointless danger. There are a million plausible excuses you could make to avoid his classes", argued Daphne.

Rosier spoke for the first time, "I don't like Harry's choice anymore than you do, Daph. But I think he's right. After the troll business, all eyes will be on Harry. To stop going to Quirrell's classes will be a

signal that there's something wrong between them. It'll be airing our suspicions of Quirrell openly."

"Who cares what anyone thinks as long as Harry's safe?" broke in Susan angrily, while Millicent accused Rosier, "You seem more interested in other people's thoughts than Harry's life!"

Rosier sighed, "Stop being so melodramatic, Millicent. May I remind you there's no concrete evidence that Quirrell's upto anything at all?"

Justin remarked, "What's to prevent Quirrell from finishing the job the troll started?"

Anthony replied pensively, "I don't think Quirrell's stupid. Assuming the worst, he sent a troll after Harry – he didn't come and try to kill Harry himself. However, you've got a point. It'd be great if one or more of us could keep an eye on you during Quirrell's classes."

"That's a good idea, but how do we go about it?" inquired Harry.

"How about you asking if one of us – Susan, for instance – could also come to the classes? Susan's nearly as good as you at Defence; so it's only natural she would like to attend his classes." The suggestion had come from Rosier.

"I'll ask Quirrell about it", acquiesced Harry.

"Harry – please! Why do you want to take reckless chances? Is exposing Quirrell more important than being safe? You can let Prof. Dumbledore investigate Quirrell." pleaded Hermione.

Harry and the others exchanged quick and significant glances among them. Harry returned carefully, "Dumbledore probably already knows about Quirrell. What we can deduce, he can deduce."

"Why don't you ask Dumbledore for advice, then?" inquired Hermione.

But that was the wrong thing to say to Harry. Harry looked at her for a long time and finally answered, "Let's just say that I don't want to burden him with minor problems."

“This isn't minor”, responded Hermione hotly. “Dumbledore will give you good advice.”

“I'm not going to Dumbledore.” Harry's voice was firm and final.

“Okay, McGonagall then”, wheedled Hermione, but Harry cut her off before she could work herself into a frenzy. “Listen, Hermione. If he's innocent, I'll just be missing useful lessons. On the other hand, if he sent the troll after me, he's likely to come after me again, one way or the other. The best way to be safe is to discover his plans and foil them. Simply staying away will do nothing useful. It'll tip him off that we're on to him, and he'll become ten times more careful. We'll never catch him then.”

Hermione saw that it was a hopeless job to convince Harry – his adventurous spirit would never shirk from danger. He was set and nothing could budge him. She huffed, “Okay. Don't say I didn't warn you!”

“Your warnings are duly noted, Hermione”, said Harry, putting an arm around her shoulder. The bushy haired girl gave him a tired smile, as he continued, “I know you're worried, but really, we need to know what he's doing.”

Millicent added, “We should keep a close watch on Quirrell without being obvious about it. A couple of us should keep an eye on him from as far as possible.”

“I'm not sure what that will achieve”, sighed Daphne. “He is far superior to us. He can evade us easily if he wishes. No, no – that will only tip off Quirrell that we are suspicious of him.”

“But it would be a very good idea to watch each others' backs”, reminded Susan. “We should always travel in pairs as far as possible. Hermione is at a disadvantage here, since there's no one from her house to keep her company.”

Daphne muttered, "There are plenty of unused classrooms in this castle. We should all stay together in some place and go back to our dorms only to sleep."

"That's an excellent idea. I'll sound McGonagall and see what I can wrangle from her", replied Harry, picking up his books and heading from Quirrell's class.

--(Scene Break)--

Professor Quirinius Quirrell was waiting for Harry when the latter appeared in the Defence teacher's office. A round of polite greetings followed, and Professor Quirrell began explaining, "T-Today, we shall be l-l-learning about the t-t-tripping hex. A very useful spell, Harry. This is the f-f-first spell I shall be t-t-teaching you that c-can be us-used in c-c-combat. " With that remark, Prof. Quirrell launched into a detailed explanation of the hex. It was a spell that made people lose balance, as one resulting from a sharp pull on the ankles. If the person was unusually surefooted, or was prepared, it would do little damage. Nor was it a hex that required any amount of darkness to utilise, he informed Harry. The only downside of the hex was that one had to hit the legs for maximum impact. Hitting the head of the target would have little effect. Which was why, in duels when precise aim was difficult, this hex was rarely used. He further educated Harry by implying that the spell was a particular favourite of the pranksters, although used at the right time, it could be devastatingly deadly. "Consider, Harry", Quirrell had said, "what would h-hap-happen if you used the sp-spell on someone descending the Astronomy t-t-tower.". Harry had nodded grimly, not wishing to contemplate the ramifications of such an act. It was a case, as Quirrell had averred, when a relatively benign spell could be far more deadly than many of the darker spells.

Having finished his explanation, he had Harry practise the spell on a stationary dummy in his office. Harry proved to be excellent at the magic. With no baser emotion required to make the hex work, Harry was able to easily master the spell and was bringing down the dummy at will, and from various angles.

Seeing Harry's mastery at the spell, Quirrell commented, "Excellent performance, Potter." He glanced at his watch, and proposed, "We s-s-still have fif-fifteen minutes before we s-s-separate for the day. I shall a-a-animate the dummy. Let us see your ability to h-hit a mo-moving t-t-target."

With a wave of his wand, he animated the dummy which then began trying to avoid Harry's hex. Harry's aim was excellent, and even when the dummy made quick manoeuvres, Harry was able to hit the target plenty of times. Then Quirrell increased the speed of the dummy, and Harry was soon engrossed in trying to hit an obviously difficult mark, and he had eyes for nought else. He never saw Quirrell standing behind him, his wand pointed at Harry, and waving in an intricate pattern. He never sensed the slight flash of light that erupted from the wand of the Defence teacher. Soon. Quirrell called a halt to the day's practice. Harry mopped his brow, and smiled, "Sir, I just wanted to ask you something."

Seeing Quirrell's encouraging nod, Harry communicated Susan's interest in attending the special classes. Quirrell, however, shook his head, "Harry, according to Ministry rules, I'm not supposed to teach first years anything about hexes apart from their counters. I'd get in trouble with the Ministry, if I started giving out lessons to a number of people. I will teach you and you can share your knowledge with your friends. You can get away with it, and it will be good practice for you to start teaching others. There's no way better to learn than teaching others."

Harry was not happy about Quirrell's rejection of his request, but nodded his acquiescence to Quirrell's logic, thanked the Defence professor and departed.

Quirrell murmured as Harry left, "At length, you are mine!"

--(Scene Break)--

Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore were watching Quirrell cast the jinx on Harry Potter. Dumbledore had commandeered one of Hogwarts' special powers to help him in observing Harry Potter whenever the boy was with Quirrell. Dumbledore turned to Snape, a

cruel smile playing on his lips. “You see, Severus, our surmise was correct. Quirrell – or more accurately, his master – plans to turn Harry Potter dark.”

“Yes, the spell is an excellent way to coax out the darkness in anyone”, concurred Snape. “Should we break the jinx, headmaster?” he questioned, although it was apparent from his demeanour that he would rather the boy suffer under the jinx for as long as possible.

“No need as yet, Severus”, smiled the old headmaster, with the cruel expression etched on his face. “This should disorient him, making it easier for us to utilise the opportunities.” Hearing that Potter was to writhe under the spell had brought a sourly delighted smile to the potion master’s face. Dumbledore continued, “Harry already has too many allies. Narcissa’s manipulations were most unexpected – she has a hold over the Dursleys. We cannot let the situation get out of hand.”

“How do you know it is Narcissa who threatened Dursley?”

“She used a couple of spells to lock the doors in the muggle’s workplace.” Apparently, Dumbledore had decided against taking Severus into confidence about the listening charms. “Examining the spells, I found that the spells had her magical signature”, he finished.

“But that means that Narcissa is working with Potter despite her husband and son’s feuds with Potter.” He looked in surprise at Dumbledore, “You wish me to proceed with the plan involving the Malfoy boy, sir? Even after Narcissa’s betrayal of Lucius and allying herself with Potter?”

“You know, Severus, I am not at all sure that Narcissa is betraying her husband”, returned Dumbledore pensively. “They might just be playing that game for our benefit. She has a lot to gain and almost nothing to lose in this venture, if she is acting with her husband’s tacit approval.”

“What has she to gain, sir? Apart from that trophy in the form of Potter?”

“Not so, Severus. Think of this – should our influence in the Wizengamot or the High Council crumble, what would happen?”

“Someone else would try to occupy your spot”, replied Snape.

“True, but that is not all. A lot of power would be up for the taking. With our faction disgraced, and our brand of politics discredited, who is in the best position to take advantage in such a situation?”

“The Malfoys”, breathed Snape. The thought had apparently not occurred to him.

“Quite true. But more importantly, the pendulum would swing away from our policies. The purebloods would gain because we fell. Lucius would then be able to gather a lot of the neutral purebloods to his standard. The Rosiers, the Greengrasses, the Lesgranges, the Wilkes, the Blacks, the McKinnons, the Bones, perhaps even Minerva, and so many others would, in the event of our total disgrace, simply work with the Malfoys if only to avoid anarchy.”

“You think that is her goal? That she plans to use Potter to ruin us?”

“I am certain of it. But there is more – already, I am hearing whispers from Gringotts that Narcissa is planning a trust of some sort involving Potter. I am beginning to wonder if she is trying to gather to her standard all who are willing to help Harry Potter.” Again Dumbledore was being economical with the truth. His listening charms had told him all about Narcissa's plans, and Minerva's involvement in the group. He would have to be most careful now, or all could be ruined.

“You mean she plans to use Potter as the unifying force of purebloods. While many purebloods may refuse to work with the Malfoys, they will cooperate with her if she is helping a Potter. That she plans to pose as the champion of those willing to help Potter, garnering his sympathy and perhaps even support?”

“Absolutely. But it would also show the others the benefits of working with the Malfoys. If the Malfoys can get things done to help Potter where the others cannot, there is no reason to stop working with them in other matters as well, is there? It is a show of her power, as well as

her willingness to compromise on the extremely conservative policies that Lucius has been fostering, and work for common goals. It would also thaw the frigidity that has crept in between the moderate and the conservative purebloods. Of course, once she no longer has need of these allies, they can be discarded."

"What can we do, Albus?"

"Narcissa is also putting herself in a dangerous position. If we can accelerate her break with the conservatives, Narcissa might find it difficult to reconcile her present allegiances with the ones she is familiar with. However, I am waiting for the definite intelligence from Gringotts before we counter her manipulations."

Snape remarked, "Her threats to Dursleys are very serious. If it can be definitely established, she will find herself in serious trouble. If we can show that a respectable pureblood has been threatening a muggle, we can disgrace the Malfoys."

"True, Severus. But that would also put unwanted attention on Harry's home life. We want to avoid that as far as possible. Proceed with our plan regarding Potter. We need to counter Narcissa a little more carefully."

--(Scene Break)--

Four days later, Draco Malfoy was sneering down his pureblooded nose at the retreating backs of Millicent, Daphne, Harry and Susan, when Snape stopped him after a Potions class. Draco was in high spirits. Snape had awarded him twenty points, and removed ten from Harry Potter of some imaginary infringement of the rules. Really, nothing beat the feeling of seeing Harry Potter bullied by the greasy haired Potions master. So, when Snape asked Draco to stay back after class, nothing had prepared him for the tongue-lashing administered by his godfather, Severus Snape.

"Draco, I'm here to speak to you on behalf of your father. He dared not entrust such important matters to owl post."

“What's it, Professor? Is everything alright at home?” For the first time, there was some worry in Draco's usually carefree and drawling voice.

“Nothing is wrong at home. How there is a lot wrong with you. Your father and I are seriously concerned about you.”

Draco was dumbfounded. Nothing from his father indicated his displeasure. And yet here was his godfather averring otherwise. Snape continued without giving Draco time to recover, “Draco, how could you let Potter get away with his antics?”

“I can't help it! The other teachers all have favourites!”, complained Draco. “Granger, Rosier, Greengrass, Bones and precious Potter! McGonagall, Sprout, Quirrell, and Sinistra can all think of no others.”

“That may be, Draco, but that's not going to be how other Slytherins see it. They see Potter emerging as a person to follow, an individual to be respected. Potter and his friends have had the devil's own luck in trapping that troll. Unless you act soon, Malfoys will become a thing of ridicule. No one will care about your excuses!”

“What do you mean, Professor?” breathed out Draco. His uneasiness was easily manifest.

Snape answered, “You are a Malfoy, you should be leading all the purebloods. At your age, your father was already building up his own group of allies and followers. In his fourth year, his word was law in Slytherin, and none dared cross him. Potter, Black and their admirers all had their tails between their legs when your father approached. That is one reason, Draco, why even the Dark Lord respected your father greatly. Even the old fool who heads this school could do precious little against your father when he was here. He is a great man. You should be trying to follow in his footsteps!”

Draco had flushed with pride, listening to Snape's commendations of his father. Snape proceeded, “But you are disappointing both me and your father. Although you have much more talent and ability than Potter, you have failed to showcase them. You have failed to impress both your classmates and the teachers. Your own outstanding

achievements are non-existent to date. What claim to fame have you, Draco? What have you done that is worthy of commendation?"

Draco went pale with anger and mortification. "I'm a Malfoy. I've done well in Defence and your classes ...", he bit out, only to have Snape interrupt him. "Yes, you are a Malfoy, So start acting like one! Malfoys are always at the top. They have always set the trends for the purebloods, and have led them to greatness. You have begun by losing support of some of the most prominent purebloods of your generation."

Draco furiously opened his mouth to speak of some more of his achievements, but Snape quickly overruled him. "Yes, you've done decently in Defence, and very well in my classes. But are you content with that? An also-ran who did well in some areas? Your abilities would indicate that you are capable of more than what you've achieved. Start doing better!"

Draco looked mutinous, but Snape looked at him very seriously, "Already, Greengrass and Rosier are following Potter. Nott and MacDougal are vacillating – they have much more faith in Potter than they do in you. Soon, they'll join hands with Potter as well. Whom will you lead then, I wonder? Are you content with heading dunderheads such as Crabbe and Goyle? I never thought I would see the day when a Malfoy was not respected in Slytherin, but unless you take care, Draco, you'll find yourself a thing of execration soon, a fool for whom none care!"

"What can I do, Professor?" Draco almost whined.

"I have spoken to your father about this. You'll need to put that upstart Potter in his place. Unless you accomplish this soon, I am afraid that you'll have to resign yourself to being one of the several inconsequential students of this school."

"How can I put down Potter, sir?" Draco was all fired up. If Potter were around, Draco would have hexed the life out of him.

"You must challenge him to a duel. Bait him during the next Potions class. When he responds to your provocations, you can outfight him and show everyone who is the better man of you two!"

Draco hesitated. He had faith in his own abilities, it was true, but Potter's talents at Defence had been nothing short of extraordinary. He would have preferred to attack Potter from behind and hex him to oblivion, but this sort of fair duel worried him. What if Potter beat him? Would not his disgrace be worse?

Snape sensed the reason behind Draco's hesitation. "I have consulted your father about this, Draco, and he agrees with it. You cannot let your father down. Besides, if there were the slightest danger to you, I should not propose it. I will be around when you duel Potter. I shall make sure you cannot lose."

"I won't lose..", Draco began hotly, but Snape cut him off. "I'm sure you won't. However, I shall be around and my help will be there in case you are in danger. Besides, come to my office tonight. I shall teach you some useful spells, and you can use them against Potter."

Draco smiled a cold and anticipatory smile. With Snape's help, he would regain his rightful place in Slytherin. It would be wonderful to get his vengeance on the upstart who had spurned his friendship and had gone on associating with mudbloods and blood traitors. They would all learn what they had lost when they had followed Potter. Aloud, he replied, "Thanks, sir."

"Good", Snape nodded curtly. "Here is a note to your next class about why you are going to be late. I shall expect you at nine tonight."

Draco nodded and disappeared from the class. Snape sighed – taking care of Draco was a full time job. He needed all but a nursemaid. But he consoled himself with the thought that Potter was soon going to get his deserts. Really, the replica of the father had inherited all of James Potter's arrogance. Taking him down a peg or three would be vastly entertaining. Hatred had long since turned into a balm for Snape's soul.

--(End of the Chapter)--

(1) - Translation - We begin well. But we have a long way to go.

## Roaring Snake – 18

### Duels and Lectures

(Author's Note: It seems to be a recurrent theme in the story, but I am trying to capture the genius of the old man as far as possible. Without a single outright lie, or a spell, he manipulates Harry into the path he wants. Here, once more, Dumbledore's mastery of manipulation, guile and deceit is on full display. Selective information and half truths are the best way of casting doubt and aspersions on others, especially when the manipulator is demonstrably not involved in anything.

Harry has a bad time in this chapter, but he will soon emerge from the depths of the abyss he has constructed (and has had help in constructing it) for himself.

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As usual, all criticism is welcome)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am merely playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

Harry was back in his little cupboard under the stairs, the confined space barely capable of accommodating even his small and sparse frame. He was bent almost double, his muscles distinctly cramped, his eyes adapted to the dark, yet making out little but the Stygian darkness that nearly overwhelmed him. His only company was that of spiders and cockroaches, and other inhabitants of dark, dank and dreary places. The silky strands of the webs that the brooms had missed kissed his cheeks and forehead, while the stale air befuddled his brain, which yearned for surcease. Harry was also feeling distinctly hungry – in fact, he could not remember when he had eaten last. His clothes consisted of rags, all hand-me-downs from Dudley. However, his ears still functioned perfectly, and he could hear the sounds of cutlery in the dining room. The Dursleys were eating the

supper he had cooked, while he languished in his prison. Harry sighed with resignation - he would have to wait until everyone was asleep before he could raid the fridge to scrounge what he could. Life for Harry had always been nasty and there was no use complaining about it to the Dursleys – he would get nothing except the scorn of Petunia, and beatings from Vernon and Dudley if he dared complain. Nothing changed and Harry Potter, the strange kid with his scar, was a burden on his family. That was the way things were.

'But it does not have to be that way', whispered a soft voice, charged with hatred, in some corner of his mind.

'It's always been that way', argued Harry.

The silky voice almost snarled, 'That is because you have been weak and unworthy until now. You are Harry Potter, a wizard, not a toy or a slave for despicable muggles! Your blood, the blood of generations of lordly ancestors, demands that respect be shown. If those muggles don't know how to give it, perhaps you should take that respect!'

Harry responded dully, 'What can I do?'

An image flashed in his mind. When he heard Petunia's hateful voice screaming at him to come and clean up their dinner plates, Harry grabbed his wand, and marched out. Petunia saw his savage expression, and pitiless eyes and screamed. A wave of Harry's wand and she went flying down the hall, impacting against the far wall with a sickening crunch. She did not move again. As Harry marched majestically giving no heed to the fallen muggle female, a bellowing Vernon, alerted by Petunia's scream, came into the hall armed with a golf club. Seeing Harry's merciless visage, he roared in defiance and raised his makeshift weapon. "Uncle dear", murmured Harry silkily seeing the bellowing hippopotamus, "a bit of payback is perhaps in order." A jet of flame shot out of Harry's wand and clung to Vernon's face, the flesh charring before the intense heat. The big man bellowed in pain, as Harry laughed maniacally at Vernon's agony...

With a gasp and a shudder, Harry woke up from his nightmare and reached for his glasses. His head pounded furiously, and his eyes were red-rimmed, if he could have observed them at the moment.

This was the third time he had had dreamt the same thing – his mistreatment by the Dursleys and his justified vengeance against them. He didn't understand it. He had long been mistreated by the Dursleys and often longed to get his own back, but his thoughts in that direction had never interrupted his sleep, and certainly not with such consistency and venom.

Harry looked around – at least, his nightmares had not had him screaming. All the others were fast asleep and Harry thanked his stars for the small mercy. He did not want to make a spectacle of himself. Wearily, he brushed his hair out of his eyes, sighed, and made his way to the bathroom. He laved his face in warm water, and washed his eyes. The mild water had brought some solace to his fevered mind. Harry dried his face, and went back to his bed, but found that he could not sleep. He looked up – the picture of Morpheus, with a cup filled with poppies, was painted on the wall opposite him. Mentally, he wished that the deity would take a bit of pity on him and grant him the soothing embrace of sleep. That, however, was not forthcoming - Harry was still too disturbed, and his mind was hyperactive. The lack of sleep, he thought irritably, was becoming a routine as well.

--(Scene Break)--

By Friday, Harry was resembling less a human than a living corpse. With his hair unkempt, his eyes bloodshot, his brow wrinkled, and the corners of his lips drooping, he was the perfect picture of the unfortunate creature that fate has chosen to crush in its whimsical caprice and remorseless stride. His lack of sleep had taken full effect, and his head throbbed dully even when he kept himself immobile to prevent aggravating his headache. To complete his cup of woe, he had to endure two hours of Snape and Potions in this condition.

He arrived with Susan and Justin about five minutes before the beginning of the class; this was a sensible precaution for Harry, considering Snape's propensity for deducting points from him, even with no cause. However, that day, his precaution would turn to be the prelude to a disaster. Malfoy was already there, surrounded by his sycophantic coterie. Seeing Harry's bleary and bloodshot eyes, he remarked, "Had a drink too many, Potty?"

“Shut up, Malfoy”, snapped Susan.

Draco ignored Susan, moved in front of Harry, and held up three fingers, “How much is this, Potty?”

Harry slapped the offending hand away, and turned towards Susan, when Parkinson cried from behind, “I win, Draco! Potty can't even count.”

“Who knew?” smirked Malfoy. “This place's certainly going to the dogs. What with those mudbloods and blood traitors he keeps company with, it's not surprising. My father'll have a fit when I tell him about this.”

“Give your voice a rest, Malfoy. We're tired of hearing your whining. When we want your opinion, we shall tell you to speak”, snapped Justin.

Pansy took two long strides and slapped Justin hard across the cheek. “Watch your tongue, mudblood, when you address your betters!” she snarled. She raised her hand again, when she felt a firm grip on her wrist. “I wouldn't do it if I were you”, murmured Harry softly, a cold menace in his voice.

“Oh! And what're you going to do about it?” hissed Draco, his wand in his hand, and pointed at Harry's face.

Harry's frustration was boiling over. Besides, Malfoy had manoeuvred him into a position where he had to either back up his threats, or slink away with his tail between his legs. It was now a question of prestige – it was about who would be the top dog in the first year. Harry returned grimly, “There's only one to find out!”

“Draw your wand if you've got the guts, Potter. We'll find out what you can do.”

“No!”, cried Susan, jumping between the two wands, her arms flung outwards in a futile bid to stop them.

Malfoy savagely shoved her aside, sending her stumbling into one of the benches, and Harry saw red and blood was pumping furiously in his veins. Drawing his wand, he cried, “Fodio!”

Draco jumped out of the path of Harry's curse and it hit a potions shelf, a couple of jars falling to the floor and shattering. Draco cried, “Furnunculus!” pointing his wand at Harry.

Harry felt a momentary stab of panic – this was a curse he had read about, but it had been too complex for him to attempt. He had put it away deciding to try it much later. However, even if Harry could not shield against it, he could still dodge it. That was precisely what he did, and although his reactions were much slower from the lack of sleep and concentration, he still managed it with elan.

“Rictusempra!”

Draco nonchalantly blocked the spell, as he cried, “Densaugeo!”

Harry reflected that Draco was well up in the Dark Arts – he was using curses that Harry had read about but never felt confident about attempting – as he ducked beneath the spell, and sent back a pushing hex in return. His spell managed to glance off Draco's knee, but Draco seemed to have deliberately ignored his hex in order to return a very accurate furnunculus, forcing Harry to jump awkwardly backwards. As he landed on the doormat, he felt the rug slip beneath his feet on the glossy floor, making him stumble. Draco's curse had sailed past him, but Harry was off balance, and this was all the opening that Draco needed. He sent the same curse again, and this time, he caught Harry squarely on the shoulder. Great boils erupted from Harry's left arm and shoulder, sending chills down his spine. Harry cried out in pain, clapping his wand arm around his injuries. His lack of balance, and the new pain were enough to send him in a heap on to the ground. Draco rapidly closed the distance between himself and Potter and kicked the Hufflepuff boy savagely in the midriff. He raised his boot again, but Millicent barrelled into him sending his wand skittering on the floor, and Draco himself went down on his face, with Millicent's weight on him. Crabbe and Goyle started forwards towards Millicent with bellows and Daphne and Susan drew their wands covering Pansy and Davis. How this would have ended was

still in question, when a soft, hate-filled voice interrupted, “May I inquire what's going on here?”

Seeing the drawn wands, and Bulstrode and Draco entangled on the floor, he snarled, “Wands down, all of you! Get up, Bulstrode! How dare you attack Malfoy!”

Wands were all reluctantly lowered as Millicent replied, her face growing red with mortification, “He was attacking Potter, Professor.”

“And you found it necessary to intervene, I suppose, to protect the saviour of the wizarding world?” sneered Snape. “I shall expect you in my office at eight tonight, Ms. Bulstrode. Now who threw the first spell?”

“Potter did, sir,” answered Malfoy.

“I see – with your swollen head, no doubt you thought you could lord it over all other students, Potter.” He grabbed Harry's injured shoulder roughly, making the dark haired Hufflepuff wince with pain. Taking no notice of Potter's injuries, he dragged the boy around to face him. “Professor, he is hurt and you are making it worse for him!” cried Justin, scandalised by Snape's behaviour.

“When I want your opinion, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, I shall ask for it. I need no tutoring from you in dealing with perpetual troublemakers.” He absently waved his wand in the direction of the broken containers, repairing them. Another wave of the wand at the blackboard and a set of instructions appeared on it. “The instructions for today's potion are on the board. Begin your potions – I shall be back in ten minutes.”

He left the room, dragging Harry behind him, making sure that his fingers were crushing the blisters on Harry's shoulder. Harry was equally determined not to give him any satisfaction, and did not so much as let out a hiss of pain, even as he bit his lower lip until it was bleeding.

Two minutes later, they were ensconced in Snape's office, Harry sitting in a straight backed chair, with Snape behind his desk. Snape questioned him, “Now, Potter, why did you attack Mr. Malfoy?”

"He insulted me and Justin, and pushed Susan Bones into a bench."

"And no doubt your heroic instincts required you to right the wrongs of the world!" remarked Snape mockingly. He continued, smiling grotesquely, "How extraordinarily you are like your father, Potter! He too had an enormously swollen head, always strutting around with his followers ..."

Harry interrupted quietly, "Can you please cease insulting my father, Professor Snape?"

Snape, lost in his hatred of James Potter, took no notice of Harry's remonstrance. "Your father must have set a record for aggression and arrogance. He got so many detentions that ..."

Harry calmly rose to his feet and turned away from Snape. He heard Snape roar from behind him, "Potter! Where are you going?"

"Back to the class, Professor." Harry's voice as utterly indifferent, as though he were commenting on the weather.

"What gives you the idea that you could return to my class when we haven't finished here?" growled Snape

"I am not compelled to listen to your ranting about my father, Professor Snape. When you have something to say that concerns me, you know where to find me. In the meantime, I have a potion to brew and I would rather not waste my time here." Harry's voice dripped icy contempt.

Snape gave an inarticulate scream of rage and seized Harry by the injured shoulder once more. It had always been Snape's intention to drag Harry to the headmaster, but he intended to gloat over his fallen foe. Now the accursed child had, in his effrontery, robbed Snape of that joy. "Insolent whelp!" he barked, "We go to the headmaster right now!"

Five minutes later, Harry and Snape were in Dumbledore's office. While Snape was waxing eloquent on Harry's sins and his aggression

against another student, and his dangerous behaviour in casting spells which could have well have blown up the lab where there were so many dangerous ingredients, Dumbledore observed Harry's injured shoulder and countered the jinx with a casual tap of his wand. All the while, Harry sat with a detached look, a cold bitter sneer about him, listening listlessly to Snape's speech. Dumbledore listened in patience until Snape had finished about Harry's alleged misdemeanours and sighed heavily, "Harry, is it true what Professor Snape says?"

"In part, Professor."

"Will you please tell me exactly what happened?" requested Dumbledore.

Snape opened his mouth to argue, but Dumbledore waved him into silence. Thus encouraged, Harry told the entire story fairly. Dumbledore sighed once more and spoke tiredly, "Did you cast the first spell, Harry?"

"Yes, headmaster"

"There you have it, sir", broke in Snape. "He admits to such dangerous actions as might have endangered everyone else's lives. He should be expelled, in all fairness, headmaster. I hope, Professor, that you will, at the very least, suspend Potter from classes for the remainder of the term."

Dumbledore looked up quietly at Snape. "Severus, while Harry may have been reckless in casting spells, you are overlooking the utterly crude and barbaric behaviour of Mr. Malfoy. Had he exercised some basic decency, none of this would have come to pass."

"I shall deal with the actions of my students, headmaster," replied Snape defensively.

"Certainly, Severus. You can decide who Mr. Malfoy will take his detention with", returned Dumbledore smoothly. "Harry Potter shall not be either suspended or expelled. However, he shall get three detentions since he was indeed reckless."

“His behaviour towards me ...”

“I shall deal with that as well, Severus. You may rest assured that I will discuss it with Harry.”

“Very well, Potter, report to my office for your detentions and ...”

“Thank you, Severus, but I shall handle Mr. Potter's detentions myself. Now, if you don't mind, I wish to speak to Harry alone.”

Snape looked as though his best dreams were crumbling around his ears. However, he turned around and left in a swift move, his robes billowing about him. Outside, however, he paused. He had done precisely as Dumbledore had commanded – helped Malfoy win by literally pulling the rug from beneath Potter's feet – yet the accursed brat had robbed him of all his pleasure. Indeed, he had had the audacity to turn away from him when he was savouring the vengeance against the spawn of James Potter. The brat was now in Dumbledore's clutches, yet Snape's vindictive joy was insatiate. Dumbledore had won a splendid victory against his political opponents by confusing Potter with the good-cop-bad-cop routine Snape and the wily headmaster had played, yet that triumph brought little joy to the greasy haired Potions master. The ashes of his victory tasted very bitter indeed.

In the meantime, Dumbledore was sombrely lecturing Harry on the folly of attacking his fellow students, no matter the provocation. Harry listened wearily – he recognised the truth in Dumbledore's words, even while he resented them. For a moment, he had feared that he was going to be suspended. But Dumbledore had rescued him from his mistake and for that, he was grateful to the old man. Finally, Dumbledore lectured him on proper behaviour towards a professor and pronounced his punishment. He was to serve three detentions with the Matron, Mme. Pomfrey and help her in her tasks. Harry sincerely thanked the headmaster for his kindness and left the office, his mind in a whirl. His foremost question was – could he, Harry, have been wrong about Dumbledore? Was it possible that he had misjudged the headmaster based on his experiences at the Dursleys? Thus far, the old man had done nothing except help Harry

as far as possible. He had prevented Snape from proceeding too far with his crudities with Harry and he had barred Snape from having a say in his detentions. The question was – was Dumbledore reliable?

--(Scene Break)--

When Harry returned from Dumbledore's office, he found his friends waiting for him. A quick glance at their faces told him what he needed to know. Millicent, Susan and Justin were bristling with righteous anger against Snape. Rosier, Goldstein and Greengrass were their usual expressionless selves, even though he thought he detected a note of disapproval in Daphne's eyes. Hermione appeared very displeased with Harry. Indeed, the Gryffindor girl seemed to have adopted a lecture mode, just waiting for her subject to arrive. However, it was Susan who spoke first, "Harry, Snape returned in a foul mood." Seeing Harry's cynical smile, she amended, "Well, a fouler mood than usual. What happened?"

"He took me to Dumbledore. I've got three detentions. How are you, by the way? I hope Malfoy didn't hurt you?"

"No," Susan shook her head, and Harry turned towards Millicent, "Millie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you into trouble. Thanks for your help."

"Don't mention it, Harry," the heavy set Slytherin girl returned. "You've done a lot more to help me."

Hermione broke in, "Harry Potter, I hope you've realised how dangerous your actions were. You shouldn't have risen to Malfoy's bait ..."

"Oh please, Hermione – I have just pocketed one lecture from Dumbledore and am not in the mood for another," returned Harry shortly. His head was aching abominably, and the last thing he wanted was to listen to Hermione's homilies.

"But Harry, your actions were reckless ... " she began, only to be interrupted by Millicent. "Perhaps you'd rather have Justin and Susan kicked around by Malfoy's goons?"

“I’m sure Professor Snape would never have allowed that”, returned Hermione stiffly.

“Your vote of confidence in Snape is touching, Hermione”, sneered Harry. He really wished Hermione would give up, but the Gryffindor girl was stubborn in her rectitude. “However, I prefer not to submit myself or my friends to his tender mercies!”

“But look where it got you”, huffed Hermione. “Three detentions ...”

“Since I am the one having detentions, I don’t see how it concerns you,” snapped back Harry. “Your consistent meddling in things that don’t concern you is growing tiresome, Hermione. Consider yourself warned!”

Hermione turned away, tears prickling in her eyes, as Daphne cut in at this moment, her voice icy and precise as ever, “Don’t be a fool, Potter. Granger’s right. Malfoy set a trap for you, and you fell right into it. Why do you think he baited you in Potions?”

One part of Harry’s mind told him that Greengrass was right, but he was not going to admit as much to her today. His insomnia fuelled frustrations were mounting to epic levels and he needed an outlet. Foolishly, she had provided him one – herself.

“What were you doing when Malfoy was attacking me? Susan, Justin and Millicent all helped. Where were you?”

Harry had touched Daphne’s nerve. She was not a fighter and she tended to avoid duels and battles. Besides, she was in Slytherin and she found it prudent not to evoke more hostility than she had to. She was not proud of this trait of hers, but it was there. “I don’t have to answer that, Potter,” she snarled back.

“To be sure, you don’t. You are never to be found when the chips are down. You were busy saving your own hide as usual,” commented Harry bitingly.

Rosier jumped to his Slytherin friend's defence, "Circe's curls! Had we not been where we should have been recently, we should not be enduring your unjust reproaches now!" He was referring to the troll incident when he and Daphne had come with the others to help Harry.

Harry was untouched by his lament. He sneered, "Ah – jumping to your girlfriend's defence, are you?"

"Potter, what's come over you? We're trying to help you!"

"Well, I don't want your help! Goodbye!" He stomped away, wishing for nothing more than peace. The rational part of his mind told Harry he was being stupid and obstinate, and that no good would come of alienating his friends who had stood by him during these three months. But another part wanted nothing more than to vent his rising annoyance and helplessness. Most importantly, he wanted nothing more than to sleep soundly and thoroughly for ten hours. Unfortunately, that blessing was eluding consistently.

His friends watched open-mouthed as Harry stomped away. This was unexpected. Harry was usually good tempered, and took criticism very well. He consulted his friends and was very careful in his actions. This was a side of him that they had never seen. Justin started after him, but Susan stopped him with a grip on his wrist, while Goldstein voiced this thought, "He looks like a walking corpse. What's wrong with him?"

Susan replied mildly, "Daphne, Hermione – don't you think you two spoke at the wrong time? He's looking ill, he's just been beaten and humiliated by Malfoy, taunted and bullied by Snape, and lectured by Dumbledore and given detentions. His temper's no doubt very short. Did you two have to pick up this moment to lecture him?"

Hermione looked positively stricken, while Daphne said defensively, "I only wanted to point out that he's being silly. You agree with what I said, don't you?"

"Of course, I do. But you might have waited for him to get over things." She sighed, "We might as well let him cool down. Don't take

what he said to heart. He'll be back once he's calmed a bit and we can pacify him."

Rosier answered heavily, "You may have a point, Susan. We were too hasty and many things are said in anger."

--(Scene Break)--

Harry in the meantime, was feeling utterly miserable. He had taken his anger out on his friends, who had stood by him, and he was filled with shame and remorse. They had pointed out that truth that he had been reckless and he had attacked them verbally for it. There had to be something wrong with him. Harry wondered how much of his bad temper was caused by his inability to rest. The detentions would serve a double purpose as far as Harry was concerned. The dreams that were plaguing Harry were, he suspected, not at all normal or natural. He resolved to have Mme. Pomfrey examine him for any spells that might be inducing the nightmares.

That night, Harry Potter reported to Mme. Pomfrey for his detention. She took one look at him, and remarked, "You look like you are more in need of my services, Mr. Potter. Are you sure you're alright?"

Harry answered, "No, Mme. Pomfrey. I would have come to you today, even if I had no detention. I have a request – it may sound strange."

"What's it, Potter?" Pomfrey was genuinely curious. Harry told her of his recurrent nightmare – minus the subject of his dreams – and that he had not been able to sleep. He asked her if it was possible to curse him that way. Mme. Pomfrey's first instinct was to scoff at the suspicions. But the boy's haggard face and bleary, bloodshot eyes told her that he was genuinely unwell. Whether it was because of a spell that he was suffering from insomnia, or from other causes she intended to determine. She ordered him to lie down and ran a series of tests. She finally spoke, "Mr. Potter, you've not been cursed and there seems nothing wrong with you. I shall give you a dreamless sleep potion that you can take once a week, if the problem persists, and you cannot sleep. But please don't take it more than once a week – it is not safe."

Harry nodded, and pocketed the potion she gave him. Then, she suggested that he go back and rest in the dormitory and the detention could take place the next day. However, Harry was insistent that it would do no good to try to sleep then. It was too early, and there was no way he would be able to sleep that early. Finally, Mme. Pomfrey gave in to his entreaties and set him to labelling potions.

She remarked, "You are really like your father, Potter. He was extremely stubborn like you. Never would he admit to sickness even when he was literally dying on his feet."

"You knew my father, ma'am?"

"Oh yes – I tended to him and his friends quite a bit." Seeing Harry's questioning look, she explained, "Your father played Quidditch for Gryffindor and managed to injure himself plenty of times. What with Quidditch and his other activities ..." her voice trailed off.

"What other activities?" asked Harry curiously.

"Well, your father was here at a time when Death Eaters were taking over in the wizarding world. Even inside Hogwarts, there were plenty of Death Eater supporters and they tended to harass and humiliate muggleborn wizards. Your father, though a pureblood himself, never stood for that kind of behaviour. He opposed those who targeted muggleborns."

"I see," returned Harry thoughtfully.

Mme. Pomfrey continued in a reminiscent tone. "Oh – he got into plenty of trouble here. Him and his friends fought plenty of those who became Death Eaters later on. Evan Rosier, Lucullus Wilkes, Rodolphus Lestrange, Bellatrix Black – they were all especially brutal in attacking people like your mother. They all went on to become Death Eaters."

Something stirred in his memory – McGonagall had called Daphne's mother a Lestrange. . He asked almost nonchalantly, "Rosier,

Lestrange – are they any relation to Sakarbal Rosier or Daphne Greengrass?”

“Rodolphus was Priscilla's brother, and Evan was Hamalcar's brother, I believe. Plenty of Lestranges, Rosiers and Blacks fought for He-Who-Must-Not-be-Named.” She returned to earth with the chime of the clock on the mantelpiece, “Well, Harry, look at the time. It is nearly curfew, and you should head back to your common room. Be back here tomorrow at the same time as today.”

Harry nodded, put down the medicine chests and returned towards his Common room, a serious doubt gnawing at his mind. How connected were the Rosiers, the Lestranges and the Malfoys to Voldemort? He needed to know and he would research quickly and find out! Were they playing a double game? Were they spying on him for their parents? Did they have a hand in the murder of the Potters? He vowed to discover the extent of the involvement of the Rosiers and the Greengrasses in Voldemort's side.

Harry sighed and wearily rubbed his forehead. For ten years, he had been ignorant of the entire wizarding world, and had no thoughts than wondering what further atrocity the Dursleys had in store for him the next day. But he had come into the magical world and striven to acquire more knowledge about the new world and its inhabitants. His lack of information, he had feared, might work to his extreme detriment. He had partially achieved his goal – by listening to a dozen people, he had managed to find bits and pieces of knowledge all over the place. However, the knowledge had not solved his problems – rather it had brought new ones. Now, he had too much data and did not know what to make of it. There was too much dissonance, too many contradictions and too many vagaries in his data for him to reach any concrete conclusions. The problems of paucity had only been replaced by the problems of plenty. He would need to sift through his data to arrive at the truth. And that was not going to be easy.

--(End of the Chapter)--

## The Roaring Snake – 19

### The Gathering Storm.

(Author's Note: This chapter explores the history of the purebloods after the fall of Voldemort. It is a bit of an exposition in places, but it is necessary for both this own story and its planned sequels. As I may have mentioned before, 'the future is to be read only in the past' as Rafael Sabatini remarks in his 'Scaramouche'. This chapter explores the outlook and character of some of the principal actors in the story. The factions of the magical world and their inclinations become more clear in this chapter. The pureblood factions are explored in some detail. People with historical insight should be able to guess where some of the ideas are taken from. Hint: bittereinders and hensoppers is the best clue I can give.

One also sees Quirrell using the event to further his own agenda. Voldemort is a master player himself. Even if he is not a manipulative genius like Dumbledore, he is quite above the bulk of the magical world in his abilities.

Finally, one also sees the problem of coming to conclusions with limited data. Harry is going to make that mistake.

Thanks to my Beta readers - Voice of the Nephilim and Abstract Error.

This chapter sets the stage for more manipulations in the next.

As usual, all criticism is welcome

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR)

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

A more immediate and serious problem than the true loyalties of Rosier and Greengrass exercised Harry's mind. The dark haired Hufflepuff first year had been considering how he should respond to Malfoy's bullying tactics. His experience of bullies told him that to submit to Malfoy's depredations would only whet the Slytherin

ponce's appetite for more attacks of a similar nature. Both Harry himself and his friends would be victims of Malfoy's attacks if it were not brought home to the pureblood prince that such attempts would be costly and would invariably backfire. He recollected Quirrell's advice that mildness was usually mistaken for lack of strength, and his experiences with the Dursleys certainly bore out that advice. He would speak to his group the next day about this bit and see how Malfoy could be put in place.

While Harry's apology was not delivered verbally to his friends the next day, a Saturday, his manner certainly bore out that interpretation. He was milder than usual, more conciliatory and much more thoughtful than his usual habit. Not that Harry was reckless by any stretch of imagination – far from it really, but his usual care was more accentuated in his actions of the day, until a fateful confrontation occurred. Harry's head still hurt, a dull, dogged, throbbing pain, but the previous night, he had taken Mme. Pomfrey's advice, and drunk a small dose of the dreamless sleep potion. It had, at least, had the salutary effect of ameliorating Harry's symptoms, and even if the real cure to Harry's problem eluded him, the relief left him in a position to concentrate a touch more than he had been able to in the previous week. Rosier, Greengrass and Granger were also much more contrite and repentant after their previous day's behaviour and the meeting was off to a most auspicious start.

Daphne took a serious look at Harry and while the dark haired Hufflepuff was looking better than the previous day, he was still well below his usual standards. She questioned, "Are you feeling alright, Harry?"

Harry waved it off – he didn't need to bother his friends with his insomnia, particularly when Mme. Pomfrey had certified that he was in good health. He replied, "I'm fine."

Daphne was not convinced, but she acquiesced in the situation. "If you're sure," she shrugged, "then okay."

"I'm sure", replied Harry airily, before continuing, "However, we've got a problem on our hands. Malfoy. He's not going to lay off. He'll come

after us now in every class of Snape. We need to handle this. We need to show him that we don't take things lying down."

Hermione, having no first hand experience of Snape's behaviour with Harry, replied, "You should let Professor Snape handle it, Harry."

Harry looked at her as if she had gone mad, but Susan answered mildly before Harry could, "That won't work, Hermione. Snape's going to take Malfoy's side no matter what happens."

Justin, who had been outraged by Snape's and Malfoy's behaviour the previous day, agreed, "Malfoy needs to be taught a lesson. He's been asking for it since the beginning of the year."

Millicent added bitterly, "He's been harassing me since the beginning of the term. Teaching him a few things might get him off my back."

Anthony nodded, "Malfoy respects only strength. He'll come after us just to prove he's better."

Daphne and Sakarbal were intensely uncomfortable with the line being taken by Justin, Anthony and Millicent. While the others had no compunction with attacking Malfoy, it was not the same for these two. It was one thing for them to toss an insult or two at Malfoy casually, and quite a different thing to actively bait, harass and fight the Slytherin ponce. Daphne was an aspiring healer and all her healing instincts militated against the course being suggested by Millicent and Anthony. Rosier was in an even deeper quandary – he was the godson of Narcissa Black-Malfoy and he had no desire to raise his wand against his own god-brother.

However, the idea of harassing Malfoy had offended them on an even deeper level. To the two purebloods, it was a return to the Dark Lord era, when purebloods fought their own kith and kin, with catastrophic results. At the end of the last war, many of the remaining purebloods, and virtually all the neutral ones, and even a few Death Eaters had vowed never to allow themselves to indulge in internecine warfare again. Even at the height of the Dark Lord's powers, that terrible creature had been unable to persuade quite a few purebloods that killing a few of their own kind was acceptable under extenuating

circumstances. They had firmly opposed these 'guerre fraticide', and this was one reason why he had been unable to persuade several powerful families to support him.

The pureblood distaste for fratricidal warfare was not really altruism, or even principle. It was self-preservation. They were a waning breed – their power had been diminished, their numbers decimated, and their reputation in the mud thanks to the depravity of the Death Eaters. Many of the remaining purebloods had realised that it was only in cooperation that their salvation lay. Both Sakarbal and Daphne had been brought up in that environment and it was their worst nightmare to once more engage in fighting their own flesh and blood. Consequently, Daphne remarked coldly, "Don't be stupid, Goldstein. What d'you plan to achieve by baiting Malfoy?"

"Show him who's better!" snarled Millicent.

"No doubt pranking him or throwing a few hexes at his back will show who's better!" remarked Rosier snidely, before adding, "It's bad enough to have people dislike us. It is quite ridiculous to actively invite hostility, particularly Malfoy's"

"Oh – and why is that?" Goldstein's voice was icily disdainful.

"Have you forgotten that Lucius Malfoy is a school governor?" Rosier snapped back. "We could get in a lot of trouble if we are caught targeting Malfoy."

Hermione, deeply uncomfortable with the stand taken by her classmates, was wringing her hands in dismay. When Rosier and Greengrass opposed the course proposed by Justin and Millicent, she agreed with the two purebloods. "Harry, it's just so wrong to attack Malfoy. I don't like him either, but we can't go round attacking all those we don't like." Hermione was at her lecturing best, already on her podium, and Anthony lost no time taunting her position, "Ah – listen to our resident moral compass, amici. She will guide us to salvation."

Hermione turned scarlet, while Rosier remonstrated, "There's no need to be sarcastic, Tony."

“What would you suggest we do?” demanded Millicent truculently.

Rosier responded calmly, “I would try to talk to Malfoy directly.”

“A lot of good that’ll do us!” sneered Justin. “We’re scum to Malfoy and we’ll be wasting time trying to persuade him.”

“Perhaps you should let me try, then”, returned Sakarbal Rosier quietly,

“What would you bargain with, Sak? What have we got to offer Malfoy?” questioned Susan.

Rosier was loath to tell her what he would bargain with. Ideally, he would have liked to tell her that he would inform Draco of his mother’s schemes and how she was trying to cajole Harry into a more sympathetic position. He would also warn Draco that he risked wrecking all his mother’s plans if he persisted in antagonising Harry Potter. He wanted to tell him that his pureblood supremacist ideas were outmoded, and anachronistic, that they would all share the fate of Evan Rosier, Rodolphus Lestrange and Bellatrix Black-Lestrange if they pursued vain follies. But he could not reveal all this to Susan Bones or the others. He sighed, “I have, perhaps, some influence with Malfoy. I can try to persuade him to leave us alone.”

“What have you been doing all this time, then?” growled Millicent. “Daphne and I have been harassed since the beginning of the year and now, because we plan to feed him spoonfuls of his own medicine, you can ‘persuade’ him to lay off!”

Rosier returned imperturbably, “Whose influence but mine sufficed to stop Malfoy from crossing the line with you and Daphne? Who but I warned him away after your quill was burnt? Didn’t you wonder why more of your things haven’t been destroyed since then?”

Millicent was taken aback at how much Rosier knew. “Why don’t you stop him throwing insults at me and Daphne, then?”

Rosier retorted icily, "I can't choose Malfoy's friends for him. Perhaps you should try harder to get along with your own housemates."

Harry was looking closely and suspiciously at Rosier, "What are you playing at, Sak? What is it you're really aiming at?"

"He is aiming at nothing but helping you", answered Daphne coolly.

"Prove it, then", demanded Justin. "Prove to us that you're really on our side. Help us put Malfoy in his place."

"Oh – and what is his place?" questioned Sakarbal, his eyebrow rising disdainfully.

"Don't take that tone with us", snarled Millicent. "You've been hunting with the hounds and running with the hare since the beginning. Now, by Merlin, you'll play straight!" She banged her fist on the desk. "You're with us or with him!"

"Don't get on the high horse, Bulstrode." Daphne's voice was icily contemptuous. She was becoming less and less impressed with this embittered Slytherin girl, who had her own personal axe to grind with Malfoy. On one hand, she had been heartily disapproving of the behaviour of Malfoy's coterie. But the propensity of the erstwhile victims becoming the aggressors had shaken her. Hermione pleaded with Harry. "Please, Harry, you can't be thinking of doing this. If he complains to Snape, we'll be in more trouble. And Millicent – if we attack Malfoy, you in particular, will have to cope with a much more angry Malfoy."

Justin proposed, "Let's vote. Those who want to put Malfoy in place – say yes!"

Justin, Millicent and Tony voted in favour, Harry and Susan did not commit themselves either way, and Hermione, Daphne and Sakarbal voted against. It was a deadlock. Millicent pleaded with Harry, "Harry, you can't remain indifferent to this. It's becoming an impossible situation in Slytherin. We're being insulted and hounded because we're friends with you. Malfoy'll become worse now!"

Hermione cut in, “You should go to Snape!”

The others looked at her as if she were mad. Snape was well known for his pro-Malfoy biases. Millicent laughed harshly at the suggestion. But Harry had a more useful suggestion, “What happens if we complain to McGonagall?”

“She’ll simply say she’s got no right to intervene on behalf of a student in another House,” sighed Susan. Harry could not remain indifferent to the plight of his friends – a plight for which he himself was to some extent responsible. So he nodded, “I agree with Millicent. We need to stop Malfoy from going too far. She needs our help.”

Daphne objected, “Harry, what do you think will happen if we do bait Malfoy? He’ll retaliate in kind. We’ll have a lot more trouble for no gain.”

“We can put him in place,” repeated Millicent.

“I very much doubt it,” returned Rosier. “We’re spread out all over the school, while all of Malfoy’s buddies are in Slytherin. If we attack them, they’ll only make things worse. In fact, things could get really ugly for Daphne and Millicent.”

“You’re assuming that he won’t anyway make things unbearable for them now,” reminded Anthony. “He’s seen he can get away with attacking Harry Potter. He’ll just want to break all of us, particularly those to whom he’s got easy access.”

“Let me speak with him, Harry. Let me try to persuade him to lay off,” besought Rosier.

Harry thought for a moment, and nodded. “Alright – let me know how it goes.”

There was gratitude in Rosier’s eyes. He sighed, “Thanks. I’ll do my best.”

With that, the group parted. But Harry could not shake off the feeling that Rosier and Greengrass had an agenda of their own, and he was

suspicious that they were playing their own games for reasons that he could not fathom. He swore he would investigate the Rosiers and Greengrasses thoroughly. He could get Hermione's help in that regard – after all, if anything was to be found in the library, she would find it! While the purebloods had succeeded in stopping a war with Draco, they had their own sympathies and actions come under deep suspicion. Their standing with Harry Potter would suffer deeply in the near future.

--(Scene Break)--

Rosier knew that he could not afford to fail in this matter. For all his bravado, Rosier knew that it was utterly useless to appeal directly to Draco Malfoy. Draco had always been arrogant and disdainful of others, but now, drunk with success, his hubris would be approaching epic proportions. He, Sakarbal Rosier, would be branded a coward and blood-traitor if he spoke to Draco directly. Consequently, he walked back to his Common Room, cast a notice-me-not charm about himself and tossed a pinch of floo into the fire, "Malfoy Manor!"

An elf took his request to speak to his godmother and a few minutes later, the tall and graceful Narcissa Black-Malfoy appeared. Rosier greeted her with quiet and stately courtesy, and after a few inconsequential remarks, plunged right into the matter. "Auntie Cissa, there is a problem here. Draco has taken it upon himself to make the life of Harry Potter miserable. Yesterday, he challenged Harry to a duel in Snape's class and, from what I hear, cursed and kicked him."

"Gracious!" murmured Narcissa, shocked by Draco's behaviour. Another fearful thought struck her. "Is Draco alright? Is Harry?"

"Both of them are fine," Rosier assured her, before continuing with a sigh, "but there is more trouble brewing, I fear. Many of Harry's friends, whom Draco has been tormenting since the beginning of the year, want us all to react against Draco. Apparently, Draco has managed to make a few enemies in Slytherin. Daphne and I managed to head off any retaliations, but I'm afraid if Draco doesn't stop, things will only get worse."

"Please explain what happened exactly, Sak," requested his godmother.

Rosier explained as much as he knew of the previous day's events, along with the argument in Harry's group. As he concluded, Narcissa interrupted with a question, "Sak, why did Draco choose this moment to fight Harry? What set him off?"

Rosier shook his head in puzzlement, "I don't know. As far as I know, Harry's done nothing to deserve that kind of hostility from Draco."

Narcissa murmured to herself, "Je craines que mes peches hantent ma fils 1." Aloud, she reassured her godson. "Sak, don't worry. Try to find out why Draco chose to go after Harry now. In the meantime, you can rest assured that there will be no more transgressions from Draco. I will see to it."

"Thank you, auntie. I can't bring myself to hurt Draco – or others of our kind."

Narcissa nodded, bade him goodbye and fell to a deep brown study, as she paced about her boudoir. She had been genuinely shocked by what Sakarbal had told her. That Draco was always proud and arrogant, she had long known. However, she had never believed that her son would take it upon to become a petty bully, intimidating and humiliating his fellow students, swaggering around the Slytherin Common Room with only contempt for others. This state of affairs was utterly unacceptable. It was not merely Harry and his friends Draco was alienating – he was offending everyone with his antics, and if he did not stop, he would soon leave the Malfoys bereft of allies. The art of diplomacy required acting like a gentleman at all times, even when it was time to be hard and ruthless. Narcissa decided that for Draco's own sake, he should learn to behave more courteously towards others. She would step in to make sure that Draco did learn this lesson.

Quite apart from her worries about Draco's attitude, there was the fact that if left unchecked, he might wreck all the painstaking work she had done. Narcissa sighed – she still recalled vividly the heated and bitter debate in the Malfoy ballroom after the fall of the Dark Lord.

The erstwhile Death Eaters and their sympathisers had deliberated on how they should react to the fall of the Dark Lord. Many like Narcissa's own sister, Bellatrix, Walden MacNair, and Rodolphus Lestrange were all for continuing the struggle begun by the Dark Lord. Several others like her own husband were vacillating – undecided which way to go. However, in the end, it had been the eloquence of Andronicus Nott and Narcissa herself that had won the day and ensured reconciliation with the other purebloods, no matter their sympathies.

After a rabid screed from Bellatrix urging her colleagues not to abandon the great work begun by the Dark Lord, not to betray his ideals and fight on to the bitter end, Narcissa had calmly contradicted her sister, "We have heard much talk about fighting to the bitter end. But what is the bitter end? Is it to come when all of us are banished or are in our graves? Or is it when the purebloods have fought until they can no longer rise again?" She had gone on to point out that many purebloods themselves were coming to regard them as little more than bandits, rather than representatives of their interests. It was imperative that they reconcile themselves with their own kind. The clinching argument had been provided by Andronicus Nott. "Let us acknowledge that the end has come and it is more bitter than any of us thought it would be. No one will convince me that any step can be more bitter than the one we need to take today."

Her words had convinced a few of those who had been vacillating – including her husband and Avery; they had saved the Malfoy name and fortune. It had been Narcissa's diplomatic skills that had reinstated her husband's political power once more, but her opposition to the Dark Lord's path had also begun the bitterness and hatred for her amongst the sympathisers of the Dark Lord. However, more dangerous to her than the disdain of her sister and brother-in-law was the unthinking, thrasonical swagger of the purebloods who didn't understand the precarious position where they were all perched. Avery, Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle had all retreated to their old lives, but their abandonment of the Dark Lord was a tactical manoeuvre, not a strategic realignment. They still yearned for the day when the Dark Lord would return and deliver them from their present predicaments by cleansing the wizarding world of the mudbloods and the blood traitors. They tolerated Narcissa mainly because she was

an old and influential pureblood, apart from the matriarch of the Malfoy family, but they held no real respect for her, and often suspected her of sympathies that were alien to them. Lucius was more mixed in his feelings – he understood Narcissa's logic and found no fault with them, but he could not bring himself to deal with the lesser breeds. He had, however, allowed Narcissa enough room to function in concert with his own policies. But Narcissa had chosen her path, and she had been cool, calculative and relentless.

After Andronicus Nott had retired from active politics and retreated to his manor, addressing himself to his businesses and his hobbies, leaving Narcissa to carry on the burden of reconciling the purebloods, the elegant Lady Malfoy had sworn on the grave of her parents to work for the resurrection of the glory of the purebloods. For ten years, she had laboured tirelessly, building friendly, if apolitical, relationships with many of the prominent pureblood families. However, Lucius' reputation as a sympathiser of the pureblood supremacist groups left had haunted her at every step and she had had to work hard for every scrap of success. Ten years of laborious and thankless work later, she had finally found in Harry Potter what she needed to achieve her dream and it was all being brought down by the infantile antics of her own son! She would be damned before she allowed that!

She sat down at her table, picked up a quill and wrote to Draco

Dear Draco,

I trust that this letter finds you in the good health and spirits. Since the beginning of the term, your father and myself have heard from your teachers that you are doing very well in your classes. Both of us are overjoyed to hear of this and proud of your achievements. Keep them up.

However, last night we learnt of an event at Hogwarts that has caused us both disquiet. We learnt from one of your professors that you were involved in a duel with Harry Potter, one in which you provoked him. Although my informant assured me that you are not hurt, I sincerely trust this is the case. Has the Matron checked you for injuries? Or shall I ask Priscilla to come over? Please write back about this.

Apart from this, Draco, there is something important – what possessed you to pick a fight with Potter? Your professor was most disapproving of your conduct when speaking of your behaviour. That you should seek to endanger yourself, both physically and academically, is very disappointing and puzzling. I look forward to your explanations about this matter.

Your actions have caused both your father and myself acute embarrassment. Can you imagine the damage you have done to us and yourself? If the Daily Prophet were to discover what you have done, we would probably see an article there depicting you as a bully that takes pleasure in tormenting his classmates. You would have caused irreparable harm will be done to our standing. We hope to see you spoken of for the right reasons, not the wrong ones! Besides, may I remind you that it is most imprudent to appear less than fond of the Boy-who-Lived, particularly when our kind reveres him as the hero that broke the Dark Lord? Draco, I must impress upon you the seriousness of your folly. We sternly forbid you to involve yourself in more fracas of this kind. If you cannot remain on friendly terms with Potter, you are to stay away from Potter and his friends.

Remember, Draco, he that holds the whip has no need of wielding it. That is how your father led when he was at school, and that is how he leads now. Violence is the resort of the low-minded, and the incompetent. At no time has he ever been involved in fights, yet everyone deferred to him since he counsels his friends and spurs them to greater heights. You might find an example in him that you can emulate.

Take care, and conduct yourself that we may hear of you as we have been hearing of you before this unfortunate incident.

Yours affectionately,

Narcissa

Having completed the letter, Narcissa called an elf and told her to deliver the note by hand to Draco. Sighing, she reflected that she had hopefully done all in her power to prevent such disastrous incidents.

One thing nagged at her mind – what had set off Draco? Was it coincidence that Draco had duelled Potter at just the time she was trying to befriend him? She hoped that Rosier might discover the answer, although she would probably have to wait until Yule to discover the truth.

--(Scene Break)--

While Rosier was speaking to Narcissa, Harry was making a request to Hermione. He asked her, "Hermione, I need your help a bit with the library." Now the library was Hermione's favourite spot in the school and she was more than willing to help. She inquired, "What are you looking for?"

Harry explained, "Any material about the Rosiers, the Lestranges, the Malfoys and their involvement in Voldemort's campaign. Also Narcissa said that pureblood friends of hers had tried to stop Dumbledore putting me with the Dursleys. I want to find out what, if anything, the purebloods did."

Hermione was non-plussed. "Harry, why are you investigating the Rosiers and the Lestranges?"

Harry bit his lip, wondering how much to tell her. Finally, he answered carefully, "I just want to know a bit more about their families. I got a book that spoke of them as great families, but I would like to know more."

Hermione was not convinced with Harry's reply, but she complied with his request. Harry added, "Hermione, I'd be glad if you don't mention about this to the others. It would be embarrassing all round."

Hermione nodded in agreement, and the duo spent the next couple of hours looking up the recent history of the Rosiers and the Lestranges. They did not have to expend much energy on it since the history of the Rosiers, the Lestranges, the Malfoys and the Rookwoods was notorious enough to have made it into every volume on Voldemort's rise and fall. Five minutes into their search, they struck gold, when they discovered about Adonibal Rosier – the then patriarch of the Rosier family. He had been involved in attacks on muggles, aiding the

efforts of the Dark Lord financially, supplying the Dark Lord with confidential information. Tried and convicted, he had died in Azkaban a few years after his incarceration.

Next in the rogues gallery was Evan Rosier. He had been accused of being a Death Eater and involved in the murder of several muggles. He was also accused of being an accessory in the murder of the Prewetts. He had been ingloriously killed resisting arrest by the Aurors.

However, it was the Lestranges who had been involved in some of the most heinous crimes. Lucullus Lestrange – the then head of the Lestrange family had been killed fighting against Aurors early in the war. But his place had been taken by his son, Rodolphus and they had attained almost unparalleled notoriety. Rodolphus Lestrange and his wife, Bellatrix, had been known to be involved in a number of ghastly attacks on muggles and wizards alike, but their worst known crime was torturing the Longbottoms into insanity. Harry was tightlipped when he found out what McGonagall would not tell him about the Longbottoms. The elderly transfiguration teacher certainly had had a reason to keep silent. Harry's sympathies went out to the the plump Longbottom boy. Neville had suffered as much as Harry himself had through the actions of Voldemort's supporters.

About the Malfoys, not much could be found except that they had been suspected of Death Eater sympathies, but had been acquitted due to insufficient evidence. The clock struck noon, and Harry rose to attend his class with Quirrell. He spoke to Hermione who was looking horrified to read the crimes perpetrated during the previous war. "If it's okay with you Hermione, continue with the search, and get me any new stuff you find about the Malfoys, the Rosiers and the Lestranges. See if there's anything about the Greengrasses as well. Find out who Voldemort's principal supporters were."

Hermione nodded in acquiescence, the horror still reflected in her eyes and Harry hurried to his lesson with Quirrell. He was already late.

--(Scene Break)--

He raced down to Quirrell's office, a few minutes late. Observing that Harry was out of breath, Quirrell, instead of beginning the lesson, waved Harry into a chair while the Hufflepuff boy recovered his breath. The lanky professor calmly remarked, "I heard about w-what happened with M-Malfoy yesterday, Harry. Are you f-f-feeling alright?"

Harry nodded, "I'm fine, sir."

Quirrell peered sternly at Harry, looking for a moment as though he would call the bluff – Harry's lie was too transparent and too obviously untrue – but finally simply nodded. "I'm glad that Malfoy didn't h-h-hurt you." He sighed, "I'd h-h-hoped that you wouldn't have need of m-my I-I-lessons this early. But we'd b-better speed up." He looked at Harry seriously, "The n-next duel m-may not be so benign!"

Harry nodded sombrely, as Quirrell inquired, "Harry, c-can you p-p-please tell me w-what happened?"

Thus encouraged, Harry recounted the spells they had exchanged, and his losing footing and Malfoy's attacks. As he finished, Quirrell's mouth was set in a taut line, "I see Malfoy u-used some advanced c-curses. Very well, w-we should start ou-ourselves with a f-few common c-curses. From this w-week onwards, if y-you are w-willing, we will h-have another session on S-Sundays. We n-need to start t-tackling c-curses and c-c-counter-curses. You n-need to know enough to d-d-defend yourself."

Harry agreed enthusiastically, before blurting out, "But why does Malfoy hate me? I've done nothing to him."

Quirrell replied grimly, "Harry, remember w-what I t-t-told you once b-before? M-mildness is d-d-dangerous. M-Many people in this world respect only one thing – strength. All other forms of power are irrelevant to them."

"Yes, but why pick on me? I've done nothing to him."

Quirrell laughed, a cold, harsh laugh, very unlike his usual treble. "You're Harry P-Potter. Beating you is a t-ticket to f-fame. Apart from

that, you're becoming a l-l-leader of your f-friends, Harry. Leaders usually s-suffer – accidents," he hissed.

Harry's face went white. He had never looked at the recent events in that light. He had not thought of himself as a leader, but Quirrell's explanation made perfect sense. He would have to work harder and learn to defend himself. And he would have to keep a careful lookout to see who wished him harm.

--(End of the Chapter)--

1 fear that my sins are haunting my son.

## The Roaring Snake – 20

### The Deepening Crisis

(Author's Note: The events set in motion by Dumbledore come to a head in this chapter. Harry is really out of his depths and as clever, observant and capable as he is, he is not really a match for Dumbledore or Voldemort when it comes to manipulation – not yet, anyway. He needs to learn and this chapter emphasises how really outclassed he has been and how ignorant of the Wizarding world he is.

The Mirror of Erised finally makes an appearance in the chapter. Has no one wondered exactly how Dumbledore knew that Harry was there under an invisibility cloak? And just what was he doing there in the dead of the night, anyway? Surely, there are more propitious times to gaze at one's own reflection – or desire?

On a final note, I have a somewhat different take on curses and hexes and my view comes out in the chapter. Question for the chapter – guess how curses work in my version. Based on the clues you get in the chapter, an observant reader should be easily able to comprehend.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Thanks to my beta readers Voice of the Nephilim and Abstract Error.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR.

--Beginning of the Chapter)--

Quirrell began instructing Harry on his first true curse – a curse to cause boils. Quirrell began by transfiguring a chalk box into a rat, and stunned it casually. He then pointed his wand to the stationary rat and spoke clearly, “Vomica!” A bunch of sores appeared on the rat's skin, purulent, shiny and looking painful. Harry winced mentally – not only had the sight disgusted him, but his scar had given a painful jolt when Prof. Quirrell had cast the curse. Another spell, and the sores had

disappeared. He smiled at Harry and spoke, “The c-c-curse can be c-cured, either by the spell or by a b-b-boil curing potion.”

He stepped back and invited the Hufflepuff boy to try. Harry pointed his wand at the rodent and incanted, “Vomica!” Nothing happened, and Quirrell seemed nowise surprised. The dark haired Hufflepuff was invited to try again, but even after five tries, Harry had been completely unsuccessful at the spell. He had made no impression on the rat at all.

Quirrell frowned, “P-Perhaps, H-Harry, this s-s-spell is too a-a-advanced as yet. Read up the t-theory behind the s-spell and we s-shall try again n-n-next week.”

Harry nodded, thanked the professor and left. His scar, for some reason, was throbbing faintly and his mind was still on what Hermione had discovered.

--(Scene Break)--

By the time Harry rejoined Hermione, the muggleborn girl had found more material – all of them chronicled the extensive support extended by the Rosiers, and the Lestranges. Incriminating evidence involving the Malfoys was much more scarce, but there were enough hints of them being supportive of the goals of the Dark Lord in general, even if actual substance was lacking. The strong impression that Harry gathered was that all three families were hand in glove with the Dark Lord. Harry groaned dismally and buried his head in his hands.

Hermione spoke gently to him, “Harry, even if the Rosiers and the Lestranges have supported You-Know-Who, why does it matter?”

“You don’t think they still do? Why try to get close to me?”

“Harry! Surely you don’t suspect Sakarbal and Daphne of supporting You-Know-Who?”

“Why not? Their entire families have been supporting Voldemort. Who knows why they want to get close to me? Maybe they want to finish the job he started!”

“Now, Harry”, admonished Hermione sternly, “that's a ridiculous accusation! Daphne and Sakarbal have been nothing but helpful all year. There's nothing to show they wish you harm.”

This was true, but Harry was giving in to his paranoid urges. He replied, “Who knows? Maybe they are waiting for the right moment to betray us.”

“Really, that's unfounded,” returned Hermione. “You have prejudged them to be guilty. That's hardly fair!”

“Better safe than sorry,” retorted Harry. “But we won't break with them directly. We'll watch them. Once we find out what their game is, we can stop it.”

Hermione didn't like the direction Harry was heading in. She pleaded, “Please, Harry, just talk it out with them. After all, their parents are around outside.”

“McGonagall told me that a lot of Death Eaters had managed to get away after the last war. I wouldn't be surprised if they were among those.”

“You're just speculating. We should hear their explanation.” returned Hermione fiercely.

“Yes, that'll be a nice chat,” sneered Harry. “Daphne, Sak – tell us why your families are all either dead or in Azkaban. And tell us how your parents managed to escape that fate.”

Hermione bit her lip. She could well visualise the awkwardness of the whole problem, but Harry's suspicions went against her own nature of fairplay and justice. Harry was operating on the principle that everyone was guilty until proved innocent. But that was wrong in Hermione's path. The only ones guilty were those who had been proved guilty. The others were innocent by default.

Harry continued, seeing her struggle. “Hermione, listen – I am very grateful to you for your help, but please don't mention any of this

before the others. We'll wait and watch. If they are supporting Voldemort, we need to know."

Hermione nodded quietly, but her eyes were still troubled and unhappy.

--(Scene Break)--

That night, Harry could not take the dreamless sleep potion and consequently, could not sleep again. He rose and bathed his eyes in the cold water, and made his way to the Common Room. He took up his transfiguration book, and tried to read, but his mind was unutterably tired, and he found he could not concentrate. His mind wanted nothing more than to shut down, and yet it could not. Dammit! This was becoming extremely annoying!

Rising to his feet, he decided to take a stroll in the corridors. Despite the fact that it was against the school rules and that if he were caught, he would likely be in deep trouble, the eventuality did not concern Harry overly. He had his invisibility cloak, and he could always remain unseen, as long as he did not do something stupid as stumble into an armour or topple down the stairs. Gathering his cloak, he wrapped it around his shoulders, threw the hood over his head and departed from the Hufflepuff Common room. He had no idea where he wanted to go, so he ended up traipsing down corridors that he had rarely visited before. They were all old, dank with a musty smell and had rarely been visited. All rooms were dark, but one room was still lit with clear lamps. Curious, he tried the door and found it opened without any fuss. The room itself was empty except for a huge ornate mirror on a mahogany stand at one end. However, it was the state of the room which exercised Harry's attention first. For one thing, there was little dust, no cobwebs and it appeared that the floor had been swept and mopped recently. Further, the windows were all barred shut and the only entrance and egress from the room was the door via which Harry had just entered.

Harry's interest was naturally drawn to the sole occupant of the room – the large mirror. On its base was an inscription, Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. Harry frowned for a moment. It didn't sound like the Latin, or Greek he had heard in classes, nor even the

Sanskrit, Avestan or Punic that he had heard from Sakarbal – was it some other magical language that he was not familiar with? It was possible, but before accepting that explanation, Harry searched mentally for any others. As a kid, Harry had always been interested in puzzles and riddles and had been excellent at the crossword – it was after all, his one solace in the Dursley 'home' where he could forget his own predicament in the crossword. The true solution struck him a moment later. 'Childish', he thought, 'just writing the words backwards, so that it could be read in a mirror.' Genuinely curious what the mirror was and what it was doing here, Harry went forward and peered into the looking glass

He gasped, as the Mirror, instead of showing his image, showed him with a group of people. Harry leapt back, pivoting on his heel as he tried to find the occupants the mirror was showing, but he was the only one in the room. And yet, the mirror was showing a bunch of people. He frowned and concentrated on the image – the group of people it was showing was his bunch of friends. Hermione, Millicent and Susan were there, sitting with him, as Justin, Anthony, Daphne and Sakarbal stood above laughing and talking amicably. The air was relaxed and free, the trust and camaraderie between them all was palpable. Harry clenched his fist in a passion – how he longed for the days when Harry trusted everyone in his group. A solitary tear ran down his cheek – he could have cried in frustration and agony, but his self-control held him back. The situation he was in was maddening. He dearly wanted to get back with his friends, and yet he dared not!

"I see you've discovered the Mirror of Erised, Harry", remarked a quiet voice from behind.

Harry jumped to see Dumbledore standing a yard away, and his first reaction was panic. He had broken a very important school rule and he was certain he was going to be punished for it. Then he saw the smiling face of Dumbledore, and relaxed a little. Harry's first reaction was to check if he had doffed off his cloak. However, Harry had not been guilty of that imprudence, so he wondered how Dumbledore had noticed him in spite of the cloak. He muttered bashfully, "I didn't see you, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled, "I don't need a cloak to become invisible, Harry. What do you make of the Mirror of Erised?"

"They show us our desire."

"They show us our greatest desire," amended Dumbledore. "I take it you've discovered the joys of the Mirror?"

Harry murmured almost distantly, almost to himself "Are they joys?"

Dumbledore nodded sombrely, "There's that, of course. Not everything that the Mirror shows is pleasant. What did you see that upset you, Harry?"

Harry returned bitterly, "I saw a group of people whom I could trust, people who trusted me."

Dumbledore looked worriedly at Harry, "Trustworthy people are rare, Harry. You hardly ever find them."

"I'm finding that out", replied Harry in the same bitter tone. He continued reminiscently, "You know, when Hagrid explained about Voldemort, I thought my enemy was only a Voldemort who'd vanished. Now..." his voice trailed away.

"Who is your enemy now?" questioned Dumbledore curiously.

"Now, I sometimes wonder who isn't," muttered Harry.

The silence stretched between them for a long moment. Dumbledore pulled himself together. He smiled, "Harry, I think you should now get back to bed. The Mirror will be gone to a new place tomorrow. Forget about what you saw and more importantly, do not try to find the Mirror. Most of the things the Mirror shows are impossible. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, as Dumbledore continued, "Goodnight, then, Harry!"

Harry jumped to obey the order before Dumbledore decided to punish him. He threw the hood over his head and ran back to the Hufflepuff

dorms, thanking his stars at escaping punishment. Had he been his usual analytical self, with his mind functioning normally and a little less overjoyed in escaping what he deemed his certain predicament, he would have wondered what Dumbledore had been doing there in the dead of the night.

--(Scene Break)--

The next three weeks passed without any further events of note. Harry had begun, more and more, to isolate himself from the others, particularly Daphne and Sakarbal. The two purebloods were initially unable to account for Harry's new found reticence, but when Harry indicated by his actions that he wanted more and more to avoid them, they had donned their aristocratic masks and hid their disappointment, hurt, worry and surprise behind them. Until Harry Potter came out with what was bothering him, there was little they could do. In the meantime, Hermione was constantly nagging Harry to stop hiding his suspicions and confront the two purebloods about his worries. She insisted that it would do more good than harm to find out once for all what they were out for. But Harry, who was all delicacy, could not bring himself to expose his suspicions to Daphne and Sakarbal. The others of Harry's group had been surprised by Harry's coldness towards the purebloods, but none of them had questioned him on the matter openly.

The situation was made worse by the fact that all of Hermione's diligence had turned up little to support Narcissa's claims that the purebloods had tried to help Harry when he was younger. Either the library, for once, had failed her or else, Narcissa had been lying. That Harry's insomnia had become worse, and that he was barely functional did not help matters. Harry was able to sleep properly only on the nights when he took the dreamless sleep potion. One night's sleep for a week over an extended period of time was woefully inadequate.

Apart from his insomnia, his scar was also acting up after each lesson of Prof. Quirrell. To make matters worse, his work on the curses was not up to the mark. Quirrell had tried to get Harry to cast some of the darker curses like the hair withering curse and the jelly legs curse, but Harry's spellcasting varied erratically. He was too

exhausted, and too unfocussed. While his frustration and bitterness could often fuel the curses, they were inconsistent emotions and rarely sufficient to power the spells into his targets.

With each passing day, Harry was more and more resembling one of the ghosts than his classmates. In fact, his dishevelled and sickly appearance so startled the head girl, Nymphadora Tonks, that she asked him directly if he was ill. Harry replied in the negative, told her he was going through a rough patch, and would be back to normal soon. The head girl did not press, but she kept a close eye on him.

As Harry departed Quirrell's office on the week before Christmas break, Quirrell sighed. His efforts were not working all too well. His time in this world was very limited and with each passing day, he was growing weaker. Only very powerful restorative techniques, and potions were keeping him functional. Had he not applied them, he would long have ceased to exist upon this earth. The body was not equipped to house two spirits and was beginning to falter. Voldemort spoke softly, cruelly, "Perhaps you should focus more on the Stone than on the boy. We may not have enough time to turn the boy dark. In any case, he is a soft hearted fool and our need for him is minimal."

Quirrell nodded and his master whispered to him to begin his plans for getting past the beast of Hagrid.

--(Scene Break)--

Leaving Quirrell's lesson, Harry walked tiredly to the classroom where his friends had assembled. By this time, Harry's group had shrunk to five, consisting of Hermione, Justin, Millicent, and Susan Bones. Anthony Goldstein had followed the two purebloods and was more or less out of Harry's inner circle. Harry's haggard appearance had made the others more and more concerned and they were being more tender than usual towards Harry. The others had already asked him a dozen times if Harry was okay, but the dark haired Hufflepuff had stubbornly told them that he was fine, even if it was apparent to the dimmest person that he was far from fine. The Matron had told Harry that there was nothing to worry about and Harry was the type that would die before complaining of ill health. His previous

experiences with the Dursleys had drilled into him that complaining usually resulted in a plight worse than the malady that afflicted him.

Millicent pushed a jug of pumpkin juice and a goblet towards Harry as he wearily collapsed into the chair that Justin had drawn up for him. He whispered, "Thank Merlin there's only a week left before break. I'm just exhausted."

Justin agreed, "It'll be good to see my parents. What'll you do, Harry? Go back to your aunt's place?"

Harry replied, "No, don't think so. Sprout said I could stay here over the holidays. That's what I'll do."

Millicent cut in, "Actually, Harry, my parents asked me to invite you for the holidays. We'll be happy to have you there."

Harry looked at her questioningly as she continued, "Harry, I take it you've never been to a Wizarding Yule?"

Harry shook his head, so Millicent explained, "It's a very colourful festival. Something you should see at least once." Turning to the muggleborn, she added, "I know you celebrate Christmas, but I hope you can come at least on Yule evening. It'll be nice to get together."

"Where d'you live?" asked Justin.

"Just outside High Wycombe. But that's irrelevant. You just need is to go to a floo station near your house and floo to my home. There's a map of public floo stations in the country in the library. We can just find the one easy for you."

While both Hermione and Justin had heard of the floo, neither of them knew its workings, so Susan and Millicent explained to the two muggleborn students how to use it.

The others tentatively agreed, but had to consult their parents. The general consensus was that they could manage that particular visit.

Hermione questioned, “Why don’t you come as well, Susan? It’ll be great to meet over Christmas.”

“No,” replied Susan succinctly. Both Millicent and Susan were looking distinctly uncomfortable, but Hermione pushed on heedless. “Why not?”

“We don’t celebrate Yule,” she returned shortly. The two muggleborns and Harry looked in puzzlement between Susan and Millicent, and the heavy set Slytherin girl answered, “She’s from a Light family, Harry. They don’t celebrate Yule.” Addressing Susan, she continued, “But you can come to my place – there’ll be no rituals”

“Why not?” asked Hermione.

“This is a celebration of the shortest day of the year. It is only Dark and Neutral families that celebrate the festival in general. But my family doesn’t go in for any of the rituals, even though we have a colourful party.”

Seeing the puzzlement of all except Susan, Millicent explained further, “In general, the head of the family performs a number of rituals during Yule. Most of the rituals are neutral, although some are considered Dark by the Ministry. But my father being a Squib, he can’t perform any of the rituals. So we just have a party.”

Harry had read about his own family’s inclinations in the book given him by Narcissa. “But my family’s Light as well!” he protested.

“Sure – if there were any rituals being performed, I wouldn’t have invited you. It would be a mortal insult to you to ask you to participate in a ritual of the opposite type your family subscribes to. But since this is just a social gathering, there’s no harm.”

Harry nodded, “Well, I’ll have to get Dumbledore’s permission to come.”

“Why don’t you go and ask him?” returned Susan.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll do it tonight.”

--(Scene Break)--

That evening, after supper, Harry cornered the old headmaster and requested a meeting. Dumbledore courteously acquiesced and Harry explained the invitation he had obtained from the Bulstrodes, and sought permission to visit them. Dumbledore sighed, "I had hoped Harry, that you would stay here at Hogwarts. I'm your guardian and as such, I had hoped you'd celebrate Yule with me here at Hogwarts. I had hoped that we could get to know a bit more about each other."

Harry stood abashed. "Millie's parents have invited Justin, Hermione and me for Yule. I'd hoped I'd be able to celebrate it with my friends. Also, I've never seen a Wizarding Yule. I'm told it's very glamourous."

"That it certainly is," agreed Dumbledore. "Very well, Harry, if your heart is set on going, I will not stand in the way. By all means, you may visit the Bulstrodes for Yule."

Harry thanked the old headmaster gratefully and left. Dumbledore, however, was looking thoughtful and worried. He called, "Liddi!"

A house elf promptly appeared. "Will you please ask Severus to meet me in my office in ten minutes?"

The elf bowed in acceptance and disappeared. Dumbledore leisurely walked away towards the staircase that led to his chambers.

--(Scene Break)--

Hermione, in the meantime, had caught up with Millicent Bulstrode. "Millie, can you invite Daphne, Sak and Tony on Yule day?"

"Think so", returned the Slytherin. "Why?"

"I'm hoping Harry can make up with them. Festive spirit can't be bad for that." Hermione spoke in one breath.

"Just what's going on between Harry and those three?" Millicent's face showed concern.

"Look, it's not my secret to tell. I'll persuade Harry to meet with them and make up. Can you arrange a meeting."

Millicent nodded her assent and the two parted on that note.

--(Scene Break)--

The week leading to Christmas was uneventful and on the day before the break, everyone was packing their stuff. Harry, Susan and Justin had followed that routine and after supper, everyone retired early to their beds. The holiday mood had already set in and even the most studious were less assiduous towards their work on that day. Harry, as usual, could not sleep and was sitting up in a chair in the Common room, trying to read, when he felt an attack of dizziness afflict him. He staggered to his feet, only to have a wave of nausea nearly overwhelm him. He had only time to stagger into the bathroom before he retched violently into a sink.

His weakened frame could stand only so much. The weeks of insomnia had taken their toll and he had pushed himself to the limit of endurance. This new malady pushed him over. He slipped on to the floor and collapsed face down on the wet floor.

Harry was very lucky that day. He might have lain there for hours and that could have been fatal to him. As luck would have it, he was discovered in a coma only a few minutes later by the head girl, Nymphadora Tonks, who being on a patrol saw Harry on the floor through the open door of the bathroom and came to investigate. Perceiving that no sense could be got out of Harry, the head girl swiftly conjured a stretcher and levitated Harry on to it. Then she swiftly carried him to the Hospital wing, where the Matron could minister to his needs.

--(Scene Break)--

"Poppy, how is he?" came the anxious voice of Albus Dumbledore.

"He is stable for the moment, but that's all," returned the Matron grimly. "Albus, he's suffering from some kind of food poisoning, and is

in a pretty bad way. Also, he's extremely weak and his recuperative powers are all but gone."

"Surely, you can cure him?" It would be disastrous for his plans if Potter died now.

"I don't know the exact problem," she returned testily. "Given his condition, I'd recommend moving him immediately to St. Mungo's."

That was the last thing Dumbledore wanted. He could see the next day's headlines in the Daily Prophet – Mystery Illness nearly kills the Boy-Who-Lived. But the alternative, if the Matron were to be believed, was that the mystery illness might actually kill the Boy-Who-Lived if the headmaster didn't act quickly.

"Poppy, are you sure you can't treat him here?"

"He's so weak that I don't dare try the usual remedies. If you want, I'll try to help him here, but I warn you it's very dangerous to deny him full healing aid."

Dumbledore sighed. The Fates seemed to be conspiring against him. With an inward curse, he took a pinch of floo powder cast it into the flames. "Healer Emmeline Vance, St. Mungo."

A minute later, a stately witch wrapped in a Cashmere shawl appeared. Dumbledore spoke without prelude, "Emmeline, we've got a problem here. Harry Potter's ill and we need your help and quietly."

Emmeline understood what was being asked of her. She had to treat the Boy-Who-Lived without undue publicity, without the vultures of the press gaining knowledge that Harry was there. She had healed members of the Order of the Phoenix quietly before, so she knew what was expected of her. Consequently, she nodded curtly, "Get him over, Albus. I'll prepare Room four hundred and seven for him. Use the floo and bring him directly there. I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Emmeline. You are very kind." replied the wily headmaster. It was good that she understood the case quickly. Now he only had to hope that the boy would not die as yet. The headmaster had too

many bets riding on him at the moment. The Headmaster continued to frown for a moment, and tossed another pinch of floo into the flames. "Alastor Moody's home!" and stepped back from the fireplace.

Alastor Moody had finished his supper and was reading a bit, when the floo alarm went off. Wondering who could be calling him at this time of the night, he rose to his feet and made his way to the fireplace. His floo tracer charmshowed that the call was being put in from the Hogwarts headmaster's office. A minute later, a heavily scarred man with a pair of mismatched eyes appeared in the flames. "Hello, Albus," he growled in greeting.

Dumbledore smiled at the sight of his old friend. "Greetings, Alastor. Can you meet me in about an hour or two in the St. Mungo's?"

"What's up?" demanded the head in the fire curiously.

"I'll explain when we meet."

The scarred man growled an assent and Dumbledore waved his goodbye to his old friend.

--(End of the Chapter)--

## The Roaring Snake – 21

### Christmas on the Closed Ward

(Author's Note: A little information is dangerous, but a little ignorance is often just as disastrous, if not more. And there is nothing as bad as suspicions, and mistrust to fuel misunderstandings. Insinuations, half-truths, innuendo and rumours can do more damage than all scurrilous direct accusations. After all, Agatha Christie correctly compared gossip and unfounded accusations to the Lemean Hydra (1). The ultimate irony is when people's plans turn against themselves. The Gods grant the wishes of those they wish to destroy! Harry touches the nadir in this chapter, but things will get better for him soon.

I've noticed that Harry is often loaded with powers and abilities in fanon, but his friends rarely have anything worth mentioning. Well, I disagree – almost everyone has his/her own set of skills and it is the job of the trainers to help the children develop and hone their talents and abilities. In my story, I am going to develop the talents and abilities of others in Harry's group as well. The chapter makes a beginning in that regard.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Thanks to my beta readers Abstract Error and Voice of the Nephilim.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am merely playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

“Emmeline, how is he?” questioned Dumbledore as the stately witch returned from Harry's ward, after examining her patient.

“He will live,” Healer Emmeline McKinnon-Vance returned grimly. “However, there is quite a bit wrong with the poor child. He should be here under observation for a week at least.”

“What?!”

“There is an insomnia jinx on him, and he has been poisoned. A classic case of Coronal’s green. You have a problem on your hands, Albus. A specialised Dark Arts practitioner and a poisoner in a school full of children!”

Dumbledore’s voice reflected shock, as he spoke almost to himself. “How could this have occurred?”

“I think a thorough investigation is warranted. Shall I inform Amelia?”

“No need yet, Emmeline. I shall make inquiries first. You may leave it in my hands.”

She returned coldly, “It has been in your hands for several weeks – without your knowledge, it appears.”

The implied rebuke did not escape Dumbledore. Along with Minerva, Emmeline was one of the more difficult elements in his Order. They were too ethical, too lawful, and too independent minded for their own good. He would have to deal with it sometime, but for now, it was more important to soothe ruffled feathers. An idea occurred to him suddenly – given Emmeline’s personality and predilections, it was an excellent one. He smiled, “But now that it is known, I will be able to protect Harry better.”

Emmeline was less than satisfied with the reply. “A poisoning is a serious business, Chief Warlock. So is casting a vicious jinx. From what I can fathom, that jinx has been on the poor child for at least several weeks. It demands a thorough investigation!”

“You may depend on me for that, Emmeline,” answered Dumbledore in a make-everything easy voice. “I have a good idea of where to begin!”

Emmeline raised a delicate eyebrow, scepticism etched on her face. With a sigh, Dumbledore explained, “Harry has been mingling with the wrong sort for the past few weeks, Emmeline. He has been associating with some of the Darker members of our school.”

“And you allowed that?” asked Emmeline angrily.

"If I intervene too directly, Harry will resent it and become rebellious. One cannot dictate every action, Emmeline," reproved Dumbledore mildly. "Anyway, our Dark friends have their charm – Harry would have been unfortunately lured easily."

"Whom do you refer to, anyway?" Emmeline inquired curiously.

"Without proof, I do not wish to name names. But it should not be difficult for you to guess who in the school has access to the advanced Dark Arts."

Emmeline frowned. The jinx was a very delicate piece of Dark magic. If Albus hinted that the perpetrator was in the school, then it must be a seventh year – no other student would even have a chance of casting that particular spell, and it didn't even cross her mind that a teacher would do such a thing. Emmeline judged people by her own lights and the thought of a teacher cursing a student so cruelly was utterly unthinkable to her. This left only one possibility – the children of the very same people who had killed her sister, Marlene! She would be damned if she let Harry fall into the clutches of the Dark pureblood crowd! She did not understand yet how seventh years had got their claws on Harry, but given the Boy-Who-Lived's reputation, it was understandable. She would warn him about his 'friends' strongly, and advise him to keep his distance from them if he wished to live.

Dumbledore was laughing inwardly at how he had led Emmeline to a false inference without a single falsehood. After all, only a fool spoke lies, when truths could be twisted to suit one's ends. Emmeline's own prejudices against the Death Eaters would do the rest for him. And coming from a seemingly unbiased source, and a healer in St. Mungo at that, it would serve his ends better than any other.

"What can you do to protect Harry?" questioned Emmeline.

"I will have a serious talk with young Harry about the dangers of his associations", answered Dumbledore seriously. "I will investigate every member of Harry's group of friends thoroughly. Besides, I will arrange to let our Dark friends know that we know of their game. That should stop a repeat of the incident."

Emmeline inquired quietly, "What makes you think the Dark followers will heed your warning?"

"They may be cruel, vicious perhaps, but they are not stupid. If they know that we know of their game, they will certainly not be eager to try anything again. The repercussions for them could be – severe."

There was a moment's silence before Emmeline spoke again. "I hope you are successful in finding the culprit, Albus. If anything of the sort happens again, I shall be forced to call in Amelia!"

"If anything happens again to Harry, I shall call in the DMLE myself, Emmeline," replied Dumbledore gravely.

--(Scene Break)--

Harry's disappearance caused considerable consternation among his friends – those that were left anyway. They searched the train to no avail, and when their searches proved useless, they confabulated.

"Where on earth's Harry?" interjected Millicent.

"Search me. We've looked everywhere." countered Justin

"Let us think logically," answered Hermione. "We've searched the train several times, so it's clear he's not here. I don't remember seeing him this morning either." A chorus of 'neither do I's followed her statement, so she began musing, "If he never got on the train, where did he go? And why did he never tell us?"

"D'you think Sak, Daphne or Tony might know?" ventured Millicent tremulously.

The suggestion was deemed worth acting upon and inquiries to the three named – who were found conveniently seated together – by Millicent elicited no further information about Harry's current whereabouts. They were as much in the dark as Harry's own immediate friends.

Hermione concluded, "Since no one's seen him on the train or this morning, he is hopefully in the castle for some reason we don't know. The best thing to do would be to send him a letter by owl. And if we don't receive an answer to it in twenty four hours, perhaps we should consider sending a letter to Prof. Dumbledore." The suggestion was agreed upon and Susan immediately dispatched a letter via her owl.

Unknown to them, Rosier, Greengrass and Goldstein had come to a similar conclusion. Daphne's suspicions that Harry was really unwell only added to their concerns. They had dispatched a letter as well.

A couple of hours later, both owls landed on Dumbledore's desk. Harry was barely conscious in St. Mungo, and Dumbledore had always arranged for himself to monitor Harry's post. Dumbledore took his role of guardian seriously, and he not only guarded Harry from any curses, or dangers arriving by post, but also from any inconvenient facts – inconvenient to the headmaster, that is. Consequently, the owls had been redirected to the ordained caretaker of Harry's interests. He glanced over the two letters, and a cruel smile graced his lips. It was small consolation and a matter of deep obloquy that he was playing his mind games with children, but Dumbledore was alienated from all such feelings for a long time now. This was life and war and one could not afford to throw away any useful cards. He pocketed the two letters – these could prove useful.

--(Scene Break)--

Emmeline Vance had informed a shell shocked Harry Potter what was wrong with him. An insomnia jinx and a poisoning attempt! How could it be possible? "Are you sure of the results, ma'am?" questioned Harry for what seemed the umpteenth time.

"Quite certain, Mr. Potter," the healer had replied primly. "And considering the state you are in, it is lucky that you came here when you did. A little longer, and it might have been impossible for you to make a complete recovery."

"But how could I have been cursed ..." mused Harry aloud.

“Considering the company you have been keeping, it is hardly surprising.” Emmeline returned drily.

“My company!” Harry looked up startled at her comment.

“Of course! Associating with the children of Death Eaters, of all people!” Emmeline sniffed.

Harry looked up at her aghast, and Emmeline saw that he comprehended what she alluded to. It had been guesswork until this point on Emmeline's part, but it was a strong hunch that she had decided to act as if it were a fact. However, Harry was still disbelieving. It was one thing to credit that his former friends had parents who sympathised with the Dark Lord, but it was quite a different thing to suppose that they actually had a hand in assaulting him subtly to the point of causing irreversible damage to him. “How do you know? How do you even know who my friends are, anyway?” bit out Harry.

“The insomnia jinx requires the caster to have physical proximity to you,” replied Emmeline in a matter-of-fact voice. “I had a chat with the people who brought you here about who were close to you. I found out that you were associating with the children of Death Eaters. Given that circumstance, it is lucky that you are still alive.”

Harry's mind was in a whirl. Could he have been so foolish as to place his trust in Rosier and Greengrass. But Emmeline Vance had no reason to lie – not that he could figure out anyway. Deciding to change the topic before she saw his true feelings, he asked, “So what happens now, ma'am?”

“We'll keep you here for observation for a week. You have been poisoned, so you should not strain yourself, at least until you have recovered. In the meantime, there's no reason why you should miss Yule. Perhaps we can even have a nice Yule dinner here.”

Harry's resolution not to let Emmeline see his feelings didn't last for more than a few moments. He was too distracted, listening only half-heartedly to Emmeline Vance's explanation of the situation. Tears prickled at the corners of his eyes and only his self-control prevented

him from breaking out in sobs. His world was crashing round him, and while he had suspected Daphne and Sakarbal of Death Eater sympathies, he would never have credited them of being capable of acts as Emmeline had indicated. The healer witch saw how distressed the boy was and she put her hand on Harry's shoulder gently. "Harry," she remarked in a remarkably kind and soft voice, very unlike her usual brisk, businesslike tones, "I know you are hurt by the knowledge of what your 'friends' have done to you. But you really need to keep your distance from them. Death Eaters are not people you play with. They are extremely dangerous."

She continued, "I knew your parents well, Harry. We fought on the same side in the last war. They would not want their son to waste their sacrifice by risking his life, making friends with Death Eater children."

With that, she nodded to Harry and left, leaving a distressed and disconsolate boy, who knew not what to make of the situation, in her wake.

--(Scene Break)--

Albus Dumbledore, along with a very strange looking man – a man with mismatched eyes, and scarred and disfigured badly – appeared next in the ward currently occupied by Harry Potter. "Feeling better, Harry?" questioned Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling.

Harry nodded sombrely, while Dumbledore continued introducing the man he had brought with him. "This, Harry, is Alastor Moody, a friend of mine and an auror." Dumbledore was stretching the truth here a bit, since Moody was a retired auror. "He is here to help you. He will be here for the next week, to make sure nothing happens to you here."

"Am I in danger?"

"Harry, if someone dared poison you inside Hogwarts, it is quite possible they might try to do something here as well. Some of our potential suspects have access to St. Mungo's." Something stirred in Harry's mind and he questioned, "Do you mean Mrs. Greengrass?"

Moody scowled at the name, while Dumbledore replied, "I should prefer not to throw around accusations without proof, Harry."

Harry digested that bit of news, before inquiring, "You mentioned helping me. Help me how, sir?"

Moody answered the question in his gravelly tones, "Albus here informs me that you've been cursed and poisoned, Potter. Now that requires a serious investigation. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

Harry reclined on his cushions. "Go ahead, sir."

Moody questioned him about his food and drink in the recent days, his friends and those who had physical proximity to him. Moody's face darkened when he spoke of Rosier and Greengrass, but he said nothing. When he finished and rose, Harry questioned, "Who do you think did it, Mr. Moody?"

"I wouldn't like to say without completing my investigations, Potter. But let me just say this – you are very lucky to be alive today given your foolishness. Learn from your experiences and you may live to graduate from Hogwarts."

Harry gaped at the brutality of the speech, and Dumbledore accompanied Moody to the door. At the door, he turned and spoke to Harry, "Alastor may have expressed things cruelly, but he has spoken the truth in its entirety. Good luck, Harry, and beware."

--(Scene Break)--

Dumbledore had dutifully replied to the letter sent by Susan, Justin, Millicent and Hermione. He had informed them that Harry had suffered from an illness on the day before the beginning of the holidays. However, he was recovering well from his illness and there was no need to be worried about. The wily headmaster further informed them that Harry would be glad to see them and that they were told that they were welcome to visit Harry Potter before Christmas if they wished to visit him. Dumbledore had apologised on Harry's behalf for his failing to honour the invitation of the Bulstrodes, but given the extenuating circumstances, he hoped that they would

understand. He also impressed upon them the need for keeping things quiet about Harry's illness given the propensity of the media to run wild with rumours about his health. Thoughtless words about Harry's recent illness might be exaggerated and reflect on everyone involved.

Consequently, a day before Christmas, Hermione Granger, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Millicent Bulstrode and Susan Bones led thence by Amelia Bones and Bianca Crouch-Bulstrode arrived to a warm welcome – or as warm as things would get with Alastor Moody. The old one legged auror gruffly greeted them outside the ward, and warned them against interrogating him too hard on his recent illness. Further, he informed them that Harry would need to be under observation for the next few days, and requested them not to press their invitation to spend the Christmas with them and thus endangering his recovery, ushered them into the presence of a much weakened Harry Potter. Harry was grateful for their company. Inevitably, the talk turned to what had gone wrong with Harry. Before Harry could reply, Moody had answered that Harry had suffered from a mild case of food poisoning. In the meantime, Harry apologised to Mrs. Bulstrode and Millicent for failing to honour their invitation. Millicent and her mother waved his apologies away and the entire group chatted gaily for a half hour before Moody declared that Harry needed some rest. Truth be told, Harry was really feeling tired and even the minor exertion of chatting with his friends was a taxing job for him in the circumstance. Consequently, the others simply gave him their Yule gifts, and wishing him a speedy and complete recovery, left him alone in his ward. Opening his presents, he found that all of them were general utility items and he much regretted that he could not reciprocate their gestures at the moment. He swore to himself that he would send them his own gifts as soon as he could.

--(Scene Break)--

While Harry was convalescing in the St. Mungo's hospital, another group of people was assembled in the Bulstrode manor. The Bulstrodes were busy greeting all the newcomers – indeed, it had been many a long year since so many of the younger scions of the upper echelons of Wizarding Britain had set foot in the Bulstrode manor. The present head of the Bulstrodes was a squib – a disgrace to the long and

honoured, if not distinguished, Bulstrode line and in such low esteem among the others that most had already written off that House, which they deemed existed only in name. However, Harry Potter was friends with the daughter of the Bulstrodes and had chosen to visit the Bulstrodes. This had forced the others to sit up and take notice of the man whom they once accounted little more than a glorified muggle. That was why they had permitted their children to attend the gathering. Indeed, there was no doubt on the score that the children were sent to represent their families for they all appeared in their full family robes and colours, including bearing their family standards on their apparel.

First in attendance was Daphne Greengrass, dressed in a forest green tunic with the symbol of the dendroid inscribed on her right shoulder, and the unicorn on her left. She was followed by Goldstein , at once brilliant, elegant and regal, dressed in flaming silk. Susan Bones, dressed in grey silk and bearing the gargoyle standard of the Bones family on her right shoulder, had followed them. Finally, Sakarbal Rosier arrived – demure and self-effacing as ever in his blue and grey robes with the symbols of the kraken on his right shoulder and the sphinx on his left. Of course, Hermione Granger and Justin Finch-Fletchley were there as well, but their appearance was less flamboyant and they lacked the officious stamp their more aristocratic friends were exhibiting.

When all were assembled, there were inquiries about Harry, but Mrs. Bulstrode told them that Harry would not be joining as yet, and promised to answer everything in full before they parted. With that, the party began, and a most enjoyable one it was. First, some of the choicest food and drink was served and later an excellent fireworks display was put up for the pleasure of the visitors. The adults left them to enjoy themselves and the group reassembled in the ballroom of the Bulstrodes, where Justin sang them all a song – a song which would change his career once and for all. The song was a saga of Herakles, and he had the audience in raptures at the exploits and triumphs of the man, in tears at his sorrow and desolation, and laughing at the quirkier and more humourous moments. It was if the muggleborn boy had the power making the listeners relive the entire life of his hero, and he could produce in his audience, the emotion he desired to at will – or rather, at song! When the piece concluded with

the death of Herakles and his placement in the heavens as a constellation, Daphne wiped the tears from her eyes and exclaimed in amazement, “Merlin, Justin! Why didn’t you tell us you’re a songster?!”

“A what?” queried a bemused Justin.

“A songster! You can make your audience feel the emotions of your song!”

“Yes, I know – I’ve done it plenty of times. But why is it special?”

“Gracious!” murmured Rosier in surprise. “Justin, I’d be surprised if there are half a dozen people in this country who can do what you can. It is a very rare form of magic and has been employed for various purposes. Manipulating emotions via songs is one of the rarest, yet most valuable skills to have. You could inspire soldiers to superhuman courage, you could demoralise your enemies and make them feel utterly lost, you could make people fall in love with you – the possibilities are endless! Arabella Zabini has been employing it for – shall we say – some personal gain.”

“Any relation to Blaise Zabini?” asked Anthony.

“His mum”, replied Daphne nodding. “She has been using her talent to ensnare men – has had six husbands, I believe. Her talent has certainly made her considerably richer.” Daphne’s lips quirked in a cynical smile.

“Justin – if you are interested, my parents can help you,” continued Daphne. “You could come over to my place over the next week with your parents and have a chat with my mum. You could learn a lot about your skill.”

Justin acquiesced and promised to keep in touch with Daphne, while Rosier, Bones and Greengrass rose. “Millie, thanks for an excellent party. But it’s getting late, and we need to get back home. Can you tell us about why Harry isn’t here?”

Millicent Bulstrode made no objection. She told them of the letter she had received from Dumbledore which told her and her friends that Harry had suffered from a case of food-poisoning and how she along with Justin, Susan, Mme. Bones, and Hermione had visited Harry and had a chat with him. She assured her interrogators that Harry was recovering and was expected to be back by the end of the holidays. She questioned, "What about you? Didn't you even write to him when you saw us searching for him on the train?"

"We did," replied Rosier. "But we got no reply."

Glances were exchanged among Millicent, Susan, Justin and Hermione, before Hermione replied, "Well, you might want to visit him."

"We will," replied Daphne. "Tomorrow, we shall go to St. Mungo's. What ward is he in?"

Hermione gave them the number, and the two purebloods excused themselves and left, along with Anthony. Rosier muttered, "Daphne, isn't it strange that Harry suffers from food poisoning exactly when he was about to have a vacation with the Bulstrode?"

"It is more than strange. Consider this, Sak – Justin, Hermione, Millicent and Susan all ate and drank nearly the same food as he did. Yet he was the only one to suffer from this 'food poisoning', and none of the others even have felt any ill effects. I can think of only two things. First, he had a bad reaction to some ingredient of the food he ate. Not likely, but possible."

"And the second?"

"It wasn't 'food poisoning'. It was poisoning the food!"

--(Scene Break)--

The Lord and Lady Rosier, the Lord and Lady Greengrass, Mr. and Mrs. Goldstein, and their children, along with Lady Malfoy were assembled in the front foyer of St. Mungo's hospital. There had been no reply to the letter that Daphne, Anthony and Sakarbal had sent

and they had dutifully informed their parents about the disappearance of Harry Potter. Such was the secrecy maintained around Harry Potter that even Priscilla, a very senior Healer at St. Mungo, had not discovered anything of his inhabiting the same edifice that she worked in. Only when Millicent Bulstrode had informed them of Potter's illness had the others of Harry's group realised what was happening and they hastened to cheer up the unfortunate boy at St. Mungo.

Lord Antisthenes Greengrass spoke to an orderly in his habitual punctilious voice, "Would you please inform Mr. Potter that some friends of his would like to speak to him?"

The orderly bowed and went off with the message, but a few minutes later, it was not the orderly who put in an appearance; it was Alastor Moody who appeared. He sneered nastily at the assembled bunch, and growled, "What do you want to talk to Potter about?"

Both Hamalcar and his wife glared in anger at Moody, but held their tongues, as Priscilla answered for the lot, "Our children are friends of his and would like to inquire about his welfare. They would also, I believe, speak to him if possible."

"How very touching!" sneered Moody coldly. "Since when are dark bootlickers worried about Potter's health? Oh – right! Since he became a celebrity! Or are you worried that he is not yet dead?"

"Mind your tongue, Moody!" snapped Lady Rosier.

"Can it, lassie!" snapped back the grim auror. "Are you all here to finish the job you started?"

"What're you talking about?"

"No matter. Harry Potter is tired and recovering from his illness. He thanks for your concern, but unfortunately cannot meet you." Moody had managed to insert a world of hostility and sarcasm into that simple sentence.

“Is that your message, Moody, or is that his?” Hamalcar Rosier was speaking in his usual cold clear voice.

“It's his, but it isn't important. What's important is that unless you leave right away, you'll be renewing your acquaintances with the DMLE – from a different angle. Your brother was intimately familiar with that branch of the Ministry, Rosier.” he murmured viciously.

“On whose authority do you make that threat?” Lady Rosier's voice was stern with reproof.

“I make the promise on my authority!” returned the old auror grimly. “I am here representing Harry Potter's guardian,”

“How very nice for you! Does that position also entitle you to keep Harry Potter under constraint?”

“Potter is where his guardian decrees he shall be. My job is to ensure that no harm befalls him – particularly from a group of bootlickers that got themselves branded like a bunch of cattle. Now leave!”

Hamalcar Rosier opened his mouth to retort angrily, but Priscilla placed a hand on his arm, warning him against antagonising the old auror. “We'll leave, but would you be so kind as to request Mr. Potter to write to us once he recovers?”

“I am all at your service.” The disdain in Moody's voice could not be greater.

“We'll count on it.” The group turned away. Their attempt to visit Harry Potter had gone awry and they could only wait and hope that Harry would try and write to them.

--(Scene Break)--

A few days later, Harry received another visit. This one was from the Weasleys. Or more precisely – a visit from Mrs. Weasley, the twins, Ron and Ginny. Mrs. Weasley had made him a jumper as a gift for Christmas and brought him some homemade pie, and they had a pleasant hour on the ward. Harry was very touched by the

thoughtfulness – he had hardly been on great terms with Ron and yet Mrs. Weasley had been thoughtful enough to visit him when he was ill – something that was in stark contrast to what his own friends – Goldstein, Rosier and Greengrass were doing. At the end of the hour, Dumbledore and Emmeline Vance joined them.

Emmeline cut in, “Mr. Potter, you seem to have recovered well enough. If all goes well, you should be able to return to your holiday tomorrow.”

“You could come and stay with us, Harry dear,” offered Mrs. Weasley.

“I am very grateful for the invitation, Mrs. Weasley, but I had promised ...” began Harry.

“Harry, if you are considering the Bulstrode invitation, you may want to rethink it for the moment.” interrupted Dumbledore. “Mrs. Bulstrode has been called away on an emergency to handle a problem with some centaurs.”

Everyone turned to look at the headmaster in astonishment. “What's the problem, Albus?” queried Emmeline curiously.

“Dolores Umbridge,” replied Dumbledore in a deprecating voice. “She's working on a new law to have the centaurs rounded up and tagged.”

“How dare she!” cried Emmeline in an outraged voice. “As if they were mindless beasts! No wonder we are always alone when we face trouble!”

“I quite agree, Emmeline. Many of us are working against it.”

“But what does that have to do with Mrs. Bulstrode?” inquired Harry in some confusion.

“She works for the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She is one of the very few who can actually speak and write centaurian. So she has been called away to translate the law into centaurian.”

Emmeline's mouth had fallen open. "They are going to offer the centaurs this ultimate insult?!"

Moody's lips twisted cynically. "By law, the centaurs are required to be notified of any changes of the codes in their own language. The little toad has all the justification she needs on her side."

"It is unwise in the extreme, Emmeline," Dumbledore sighed sadly. He continued, "Be that as it may, we need not concern ourselves with it at the moment. The question is – how will Harry spend the remainder of his holidays."

"What options have I got, Professor?"

"You can come back to Hogwarts for the remainder of the holidays. Or you may accept the invitation that Mrs. Weasley has so graciously extended you. I doubt you wish to return to your relatives?"

Harry sighed. None of the choices offered him were particularly attractive. Ron Weasley was not a particular friend of his, and while the twins made him laugh, he was more serious than they. But he could not bring himself to throw the invitation she had kindly extended back in her face by refusing her. He sighed, "Mrs. Weasley's invitation should be fine, Professor."

--(Scene Break)--

The two weeks at the Weasleys were among the strangest and most divided times Harry spent in his life, including his time at the Dursleys. The Weasleys were kind to him, and Ron and Ginny spent a lot of time with him. The twins tried to cheer up Harry by outdoing themselves in their pranks, Ron and Ginny tried to interest him in flying and Quidditch, but although Harry took part in those activities for decency's sake, his mind was elsewhere and his heart was not in league with his body. Harry was distract, bitter and upset. Much of this was put down by the Weasleys to his recent weakness and his need to come to terms with the new life, but the truth was that Harry was suffering from a case of mild shock. He could not reconcile himself with the fact that two people he had believed his good friends had

poisoned and cursed him. It did not help that the information he got from the Weasleys portrayed the Rosiers, the Greengrasses and the Malfoys in the worst light. They were Death Eaters, or Death Eater sympathisers, and people who had fought Harry's parents in the last war – that was the pith of the information Harry got from the Weasleys.

The dark haired Hufflepuff boy was broken hearted and disconsolate. On the one hand, he had enjoyed the dry insights of Rosier and the grave advice of Greengrass. He enjoyed their seriousness, admired their drive and passion for their selected fields, valued their knowledge of the various subjects and he had come to respect them, both for themselves and their abilities. But now all that had been shattered – his world was destroyed and he was left tasting the ashes of their betrayal. He slammed his fist on the ground in impotent rage and frustration – why, oh why, did they have to poison and curse him?! Was he doomed by fate that he could never have people he liked as his friends? On the other hand, prudence dictated that he avoid them and on that score at least, Harry had no illusions. Harry desired to live, and that required being more careful about himself.

But the problem was that Harry had not much else to hold on to. His other friends – Hermione, Susan, Millicent and Justin were all away from him at the present, and he dared not write his concerns to them in a letter. Besides, it was not like they could help either, and his own sense of delicacy did not permit him to confide in them.

Harry was genuinely grateful for the kind courtesy extended him by the Weasleys. They had come to take care of him when no one else had even bothered to offer. So much for the gratitude of the Wizarding world towards the Boy-Who-Lived, reflected Harry bitterly. The Weasleys had proven themselves by taking him into their home when he was unwanted elsewhere. And Harry would have done much to replicate his kindness, had he not been otherwise unhappy.

The main problem for Harry was that the Weasleys were laid back and not at all his type. Ron would rather idle his time away, Ginny was a mindless fan girl who saw not Harry Potter, but the Boy Who Lived in him, and the Weasley twins were always dreaming up their next prank. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Percy Weasley were usually

engrossed in their own work. Harry felt like a fish out of water in the Weasley household and it was a great relief when the holidays came to an end and school began. He looked forward to meeting Justin, Hermione, Susan and Millicent. At least, he had someone who could understand him!

--(Scene Break)--

Dumbledore had received daily reports from the Weasleys and there was good and bad news from them. Harry being bitter about the two purebloods of his group greatly pleased Dumbledore. This was what he had set to achieve and it seemed that success was finally in his grasp. Rosier and Greengrass – or more accurately, their parents – were among the most dangerous people to Dumbledore's plans in Harry's group of friends, and the old man had set out to eliminate them. It was not that they had to do anything – just their remaining friends with Harry would have sent the wrong signals to the people at large. Dumbledore had spent a considerable amount of time in selling the theme that Harry and Dumbledore were acting in tacit and that Harry Potter was in perfect consonance with Dumbledore. To see Harry on very friendly terms with the people who opposed Dumbledore would be a body blow to that idea. Now that problem had been rectified. He merely had to guard against a return of the purebloods to Harry's confidence.

The wily headmaster snickered briefly, wondering what Quirrell – or rather, his master – would say if he knew how much he had assisted the old man by cursing Harry. Really – it was all about using events to one's advantage that gave the greatest power to him. He let others do the dirty work while reaping the harvest of their actions. For a moment, he had been worried that Severus had outdone himself in his hatred and poisoned Harry to death. But in the end, regardless, it had all worked perfectly. Harry was still alive, and between Severus' poison and Quirrell's curse both being blamed discreetly on the two purebloods in Harry's group, they were now marginalised and ineffective. To top it all, Anthony Goldstein had followed them and relieved Dumbledore of the effort to dislodge him from the group. Now the only one in Harry's group who could pose a danger to Dumbledore was Susan Bones. Idly, Dumbledore wondered what kind of scheme would be best to get rid of Susan Bones. Should her

influence be undermined by a character assassination campaign, or should she be eliminated in a more physical fashion? The more ruthless alternative had much to commend in it – the Bones had long been a thorn in his side and removing the last scion of the Bones family in the younger generation would be very sweet for Dumbledore. However, that could wait and was not a high priority task – there were other things he had to accomplish. With a greatly weakened Harry in his hands, the boy would be malleable and would be easy to manoeuvre into the role Dumbledore had in mind for Harry Potter.

There was however, one bit of bad news. The problem was that Harry was uncomfortable with the Weasleys. Dumbledore had deliberately let loose the Weasleys again on Harry. He had suspected that Harry had been unhappy with the Weasleys' attitude towards things in general. He wished to confirm that suspicion and had allowed the Weasleys to take Harry again. That Harry, even when emotionally shattered and suffering from shock could keep his silence without confiding in them his worries augured ill for using the Weasleys as a weapon to mould Harry Potter. But then, that was precisely why he had sent Harry to the Weasleys – to gauge how useful as a family the Weasleys would be to Dumbledore in controlling Harry Potter.. The Weasleys were not remotely subtle and if their kindness could not win over Harry, there were others whom the headmaster would rely on. If Harry got suspicious of them, let him – the wily headmaster had other strings to his bow, and he would control Harry in other ways.

Dumbledore popped a sherbet lemon into his mouth. Life was very good indeed.

--(End of the chapter)--

(1) The Lemean Hydra was a nine headed monster with eight mortal heads and an immortal one. Herakles second task was to slay this vicious beast. Whenever, he cut off one head, two sprouted in place. Herakles and his cousin destroyed the beast with a combination of fire and sword. The immortal head was crushed beneath a great rock. Herakles dipped his arrows in the hydra venom, using it in his future battles.

The Roaring Snake – 22

## History and Reconciliation

(Author's Note: This also contains a bit of back-story for Minerva McGonagall and why she can be much more sympathetic towards Harry's present predicament.

Finally, this contains the long-awaited reconciliation of House Potter. House Potter once more becomes functional.

Thanks to my Beta readers, Abstract Error and Voice of the Nephilim for their insightful remarks.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am merely playing in the world created by JKR.

--(Beginning of the Chapter)--

The first day of return was welcome for Harry. He would have his lessons to occupy his mind and that would be a better thing than brooding over Rosier, Goldstein and Greengrass. For all that he was conflicted and bitter, he still retained his priorities. and he wished to succeed in class. The first couple of days were uneventful and Harry continued avoiding Rosier, Goldstein and Greengrass. They had made no move to approach him either, although it was obvious to those who observed carefully that they were waiting for Harry Potter to make the initial move. However, things came to a head in the first class of Professor McGonagall after the Christmas break.

McGonagall had given everyone a hard exercise of transfiguring pebbles into paperweights and while everyone was busy with the transfiguration, she walked around helping and correcting students. As she approached Harry, she bent over his work to inspect it and spoke quietly, "Harry, stay back after class. I wish to speak with you." McGonagall had heard of Harry's illness and his visit to the Weasleys from Dumbledore and she was worried about Harry. The first thing

she wanted to discern was just what was going on around the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry sighed inwardly as he complied with McGonagall's instructions. When the others were gone, she questioned, "Harry, are you alright? How are you feeling now?"

"I'm fine, ma'am," replied Harry, unable to keep his weariness out of his voice. Lying to McGonagall made him ashamed. The last few weeks had changed Harry badly. He had too much conflicting information, and he was unable to make sense of it. Unsure whom to trust, Harry was more and more cloistering himself from his friends. Terrified of making mistakes in trust, he was choosing to trust no one at all.

McGonagall took no notice of his evasion. She forced him to look into her eyes and asked, "Are you really fine, Harry? Please tell me the truth."

"I am just recovering, ma'am. I will be well soon." Harry's half truth brought a frown to Minerva's face. She returned, "I'm not speaking about your recent illness. I have been concerned about you for the last few weeks. You're isolating yourself and that's always a very bad thing. Now what's happened between you and the others?"

"Nothing much, Professor?" a little sulkily. This was not something he wished to discuss.

Minerva snorted. She never had a lot of patience for mind games, and she was certainly more than a match for Harry. She answered sternly, "Harry! I've been a teacher for more than thirty years here and I know things are wrong when I see them. You settled down in the first three months, making a bunch of friends who held close to you. They were willing to face a troll with you. Then you suddenly broke up, and now you are miserable, and they are miserable, even if all of you've been putting up a brave face and pretending as if nothing is wrong. Now what went wrong? What did you all quarrel about?"

Harry was surprised at Minerva's perspicacity. He frowned if puzzlement, and hesitantly replied, "We didn't quarrel, ma'am..." His

voice trailed away. After all, if any adult could be trusted, it would be Minerva. And yet, he did not like taking his problems to an adult, no matter how well intentioned. He was accustomed to handle his problems in his own way. Minerva saw it and spoke sharply, "Stop being so insufferably pigheaded and obstinate, Potter. We're all here to help you, if only you let us. So if you didn't quarrel, why have you all been avoiding each other like the plague?"

Harry sighed in defeat, "Very well, ma'am, I'll tell you. But it'll take some explanation."

Minerva nodded, and Harry told his story very fairly. He began with the attack by Malfoy, and its subsequent complications. He then told her of his suspicions of Rosier and Greengrass, and how he had researched their families and found enough of them in Voldemort's ranks to fill a rogues gallery. He also told her of the sleeplessness jinx on him and the subsequent poisoning attempt on him. He also told her of Dumbledore's conclusions that it had been perpetrated by someone close to him, since it required proximity to his person.

Minerva was appalled at what she was hearing. Just what was going on in the school? How come students were poisoned and cursed without anyone being the wiser? She questioned Harry, "What does all this have to do with your friends? Surely, you don't suspect them?"

"Why not?" retorted Harry. "After all, the Rosiers and the Lestranges have been Voldemort's followers!"

Minerva nodded grimly – so this was the problem. Harry's suspicions of the loyalties of Daphne and Sakarbal. She shook her head, "There are two reasons, Harry. The simpler one is that jinxes are among the most difficult spells to cast. It would take enormous skill and a long exposure to the Dark Arts to be able to do that."

Harry replied quietly, "Daphne and Sakarbal are both extremely skilled, Professor. How can we be sure they are incapable of it?"

"Jinxes would tax a fully qualified wizard or witch, Harry. It is most unlikely they would be able to cast a jinx."

"Healer Vance does not think so," returned Harry grimly.

"Emmeline said two first years had cast a jinx!" Minerva was frankly astonished. "Did she actually say that Rosier and Greengrass were guilty?"

Harry cudgelled his brain to check what she had actually said. Now that he thought of it, he realised that she had blamed his dark friends', but she had never named them. He had supposed it to refer to Rosier and Greengrass. He replied slowly, "N – no. She said that I had been cursed by my dark friends. She said I should keep my distance from them if I wished to live. But she didn't mention any names specifically."

"Harry, I will ask Emmeline who she was referring to. But it is all but impossible for first years to cast jinxes. It would require expertise with dark magic of the most advanced kind."

Minerve collected herself for a moment, before proceeding, "Besides, Harry, while several of the Rosiers and the Lestranges did indeed follow He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, I can tell you for certain that Daphne's parents were never involved in helping You-Know-Who. They fled the country precisely to avoid the war. And the Rosiers – Sakarbal's parents – were not in the country during the last war either. Further, Harry, you cannot guess at guilt by looking at their associations."

"Why not, ma'am?"

Minerva sighed tiredly, "Harry, one of the most terrible things about the last war was that it was not fought with an unknown enemy. The enemy was not one of those nameless, faceless ones you can fight without regret." She continued sombrely, looking very seriously at Harry, "We often fought our own kith and kin. The 'enemy' was often our own – our family, our friends. Believe me, I should know." Her eyes were old and sad, as she continued, "I fought for the Light side, while my own brother was a Death Eater!"

Harry was flabbergasted and gaped at her in horror as the elderly transfiguration teacher continued in a gentle, yet weary, voice, "It was

the same for several other families. The Crouches, the Blacks, and so many others suffered a similar fate. Parents fought children, uncle fought nephew, and sibling sibling. It was mad, horrible."

"What happened?" whispered Harry. "To your brother, I mean."

Minerva laughed bitterly, "He got in over his head, and was found dead under strange circumstances. We never found out whether he was killed by the Ministry or by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's people."

"So you think Daphne and Sakarbal are innocent?" inquired Harry, hopeful and tentative at once.

Minerva returned quickly to the present. She had shut out her unpleasant memories with a barrier of steel and she would rather it remained so. She answered in her usual crisp voice, "I did not say that. It is remotely possible that they are indeed guilty. I shall investigate this matter, Harry. In a day or two, I shall have a definite answer for you."

Harry thanked her with genuine gratitude, and left.

--(Scene Break)--

Minerva did not waste time. She intended to find out and the first thing she did was to send for Sakarbal and Daphne, inviting them to meet her in her office in an hour. The duo did not disappoint the elderly transfiguration mistress and presented themselves promptly at the named hour. Minerva waved them both into seats and spoke without preamble. "I have been just speaking to Mr. Potter. He had some startling information to share with me. Can you two guess what it might concern?"

Rosier and Greengrass exchanged a quick glance. Daphne answered for the duo, "Let me guess. It has to do with Potter's recent ... illness." She pronounced the last word with such a singular contempt that Minerva almost flinched. "What do you know about his illness, Ms. Greengrass?" she returned tightly

Daphne remarked drily, "A very queer illness it was."

"Undoubtedly, since he was poisoned." If Minerva hoped to surprise her two students with that information, it failed signally. Rosier looked with detached interest, while Daphne affected even more indifference, as she responded, "Hardly surprising."

"A student has been found poisoned and you find it unsurprising, Ms. Greengrass?"

"Professor, please – we were told by Granger that Potter suffered from 'food poisoning'. A 'food poisoning' that is careful to select only him, while leaving everyone else who shared the same food and drink unscathed is a little outre. But what has it got to do with us?"

Minerva didn't beat about the bush, "Have you any idea who might have done it?"

"No, ma'am," returned Rosier.

"Are you sure? People in this school have accused you of being involved!"

This was something that the two purebloods had not really expected. They gaped in shock at the transfiguration professor. "Why on earth would we poison Harry?" Rosier echoed incredulously.

"He has been cursed and poisoned, all in the last month or so. The only people ..." Minerva broke off seeing the momentary expressions of horror on the faces of the two purebloods. "So you didn't know he had been cursed as well?"

They shook their heads in mute denial, as Minerva continued, "The only people who were in a position to do that were people who are about him. Including you two."

"What was he cursed with, ma'am?" asked Rosier.

"An insomnia jinx."

Greengrass' face whitened at that. "Oh dear!" she murmured. "I never thought about ..." her voice trailed away.

"Yes, Ms. Greengrass?"

The Slytherin girl sighed wearily, "It was obvious to me from his lassitude, his bleary, bloodshot eyes, and his continual irritation that he was not sleeping well. But I never considered a jinx ..."

There was a moment's silence and then Rosier spoke, "But why approach us about this, Professor?" Then an unpleasant thought occurred to him, and he continued in a colder tone, "Does Potter suspect us?"

"Harry Potter does not know what to believe. He desperately wants to establish that you two are not guilty, but he has read that many members in your families supported He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He has conflicting information about you. He wants you two back in his group, but dares not approach you directly because he fears making a mistake in trusting you. Some sources have suggested to him that you two might have been implicated in the attack on him. Therefore, he is confused and worried. Given the recent events, you should be able to understand his caution."

"We can't help his paranoia," returned Daphne grimly. "We've always stood by him."

"Is that your monstrous view of Potter's fears, Ms. Greengrass? Certainly, from his point of view, he has reasons to worry. There were members in your families who supported He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Given what Harry has suffered because of You-Know-Who, he is understandably concerned. I suppose you never discussed this matter frankly with Potter?"

Rosier replied succinctly, "No."

The elderly transfiguration teacher nodded, "No wonder there have been misunderstandings galore. I have seen how miserable both of you are. You want to get back with Potter." Seeing the two attempt to deny her statement, she held up her hand, "I've seen you both bitter

and hurt at Potter avoiding you two, even if you are making a great effort at hiding your emotions behind your aristocratic masks, Now, why would you bother if you didn't care?"

That stumped them, and they glared at the transfiguration teacher, while Minerva continued serenely, "Listen, you two. I only wish to help you and help Harry. I want to make sure that you are happy. Therefore, I ask you to answer me truthfully. Did you two know or have anything to do with the attacks on Harry?"

Daphne answered her readily, "We had nothing to do with the attacks, ma'am. I suspected that he was not able to sleep properly, but that was the extent of my knowledge. I had no way of finding the causes behind it. His poisoning we suspected only when Hermione told us after her visit to St. Mungo."

Minerva had been watching them carefully. She nodded, "I believe you." She sighed, "Now how do we convince Harry?"

"If I may make a suggestion, there are several truth serums", Daphne spoke with grim resolve. "We could take one in your and Potter's presence. We'll answer your questions. That should settle this matter."

"Daphne!" interjected Rosier incredulously.

"Oh – I am so sick of this!" Daphne burst out bitterly. "Everyone looks at us strangely wondering whether we are Death Eaters in the making, when we will show our true colours, even if they don't dare openly question us." Daphne had leapt up from her chair and was pacing up and down swiftly. "Their eyes say it, even if their tongues don't! We are presumed guilty until proven guilty, even if we hate the Dark Lord as much as the others do! No, professor, I want to take a truth serum to end these continuous whispers!"

Minerva was shocked for a minute by the outburst, but she recovered fast. She had never seen things from their point of view. She reflected bleakly that they had all forgotten the first necessity of justice. It was not punishing the guilty that was the most important thing; it was clearing the innocent. Until the innocents associated even remotely

with a crime were cleared, suspicions and insinuations would always persist and continue to haunt them. She spoke with genuine kindness in her voice, "Your decision is commendable, Ms. Greengrass. What about you, Mr. Rosier?"

"I agree, ma'am. There has been too little frankness, and we are all paying the price for it. If you permit, we'll stay here until you brew the potion – or get it from Snape."

"Why, Mr. Rosier?" queried Minerva curiously.

"Well, Professor, when you invited us here, we knew nothing of why we'd been called. We'd rather stay here so that we can't later be accused of getting an antidote to the truth potion."

"I'm sure no one will think of that", returned Minerva soothingly.

"Perhaps not, but it is better to close all potential loopholes, ma'am." He laughed coldly, "If you're doing someone, you might as well do it properly."

"Be it so", nodded Minerva. She spoke to the portrait of a wizard playing cards, asking him to fetch Harry Potter. She went to a cupboard, drew out a cauldron and a tripod, and started fetching the ingredients for the potion. A few minutes later, as she was brewing the potion, Harry Potter entered and seeing the pureblood duo with McGonagall looked with a faint hope at the professor. Minerva informed Harry of what the two purebloods had offered, and Harry replied, "Well, Professor, I'd like to take the truth serum myself. I'll be able to answer what is truly worrying me. It will do good to be honest all round."

"Very well, Mr. Potter", nodded Minerva.

""What's the potion?" questioned Harry, but before she could answer, it was Daphne who spoke. "mitis verum venenum". Harry shot a quizzical look at her and she answered, "A truth potion that prevents anyone from speaking any lies. All questions one answers have to be answered truthfully." She refrained from adding that it was not as

powerful as veritaserum – which could compel people to speak the entire truth. It merely prevented people from lying.

A few minutes later, the potion simmered down and Minerva handed them a all a dose in a goblet.

McGonagall rose to her feet, “If you wish to discuss in my absence ...”

Harry interrupted her, “Professor, please – I'd be grateful if you'd stay. If it is okay with Sak and Daphne, that is.”

The two purebloods nodded their assent and Harry spoke first. He spoke of his suspicions, about his hearing from Mme. Pomfrey about the Lestranges and Rosiers supporting Voldemort, and how he had researched the two families in the library found nothing to exonerate the others who had not been indicted. He spoke of his knowledge that several Death Eaters had escaped punishment, and slipped back. He then spoke of Dumbledore's warnings about his company, and finally, he talked of the curses and the poisoning attempts and the subsequent remarks of Healer Vance. It was a clear statement of why he was worried – frank, and forthright.

Rosier's lips quirked cynically, “You didn't do you research well, Potter.”

“Oh?”

“My mother is a Rookwood. Her brother, Augustus Rookwood, was also one of the convicted Death Eaters. He is said to have supplied confidential information to the Dark Lord from within the Ministry.”

“Sak!” remonstrated Daphne. Rosier fell silent, while Daphne continued with a sigh. “What do you believe, Harry? Do you think we cursed and poisoned you?”

Harry replied honestly, “I don't know what to believe. I want to believe that this is all a mistake, that you two are innocent. But at the same time, I can't deny that I am worried.”

Daphne closed her eyes and spoke in a weary voice, "Potter, it's true that many in our families supported the Dark Lord. But our parents had nothing to do with them. We told you months ago that our parents were not in the country during the last war. What we didn't tell you is that it was precisely because the others in their families supported the Dark Lord that our parents left the country during the last war."

Harry looked up at that, as Daphne continued, "Neutrality is not an option where the Dark Lord is concerned, Potter. You are either with him, or against him. Those against him get chopped down. Our parents didn't want to join the Dark Lord, and didn't sympathise with his ideals. But they could not support Dumbledore because they couldn't bring themselves to fight their own kin. So they did the only thing possible – they fled the country. And the man who helped them flee the country, the man who helped so many other purebloods who didn't support the Dark Lord escape the country, was your father – James Potter. That's one main reason we are all grateful to House Potter."

Minerva nodded in understanding, while Harry looked thoughtful. Sakarbal asked quietly, "Why do you hate the Dark Lord, Harry?"

"Because of what he did to my family!" shot back Harry.

"What do you think he did to our families?" demanded Sakarbal. "He turned us one against the other, most of our families are dead or in Azkaban because of him, and you think we'd support the Dark Lord?!" This was the most animated he had seen Rosier. The normally mild, if cynical, Rosier was never one to exhibit any emotion.

"You dislike Voldemort?"

"No, we loathe him," returned Rosier.

Harry nodded gravely, and Daphne continued, disclaiming all knowledge of the attacks on Harry. They spoke of the extent of their suspicions, but that was all they knew. She also vowed to Harry that neither they, nor their families had any ill intentions or designs on

Harry Potter. Harry nodded, "I believe you. I am sorry I began suspecting ..."

Sakarbal interrupted, "We were all foolish, Harry. It would have been better for all of us if we had honestly told you about our own families."

"Still, I should have confronted you directly. But I could not ..."

Minerva intervened at that stage. "I hope you all realise how silly you all have been. Remember, if you have concerns, they are best addressed openly. Still, I am glad you have resolved this amiably. Learn from this experience and be wiser in the future. Now – curfew is all but on us, and you should get back to your Common rooms."

All three of them genuinely thanked Minerva and headed out.

--(Scene Break)--

Dumbledore had been alerted by one of the portraits about what was transpiring in Minerva's office. With a hearty curse, he had used his power over Hogwarts to listen to their conversation. When Harry finally believed in the innocence of Rosier and Greengrass, Dumbledore knew that his game was lost for the moment and he was back to square one. It was all he could do to prevent himself from marching to Minerva's chambers and hex the Merlin blighted witch into oblivion! Why could that infernal busybody not mind her own business and leave Potter to him?! She had ruined two months of his solid and painstaking work in two hours! Could she not see that Potter's sacrifice was for the greater good? Potter was his and she should understand that! Interfering in the headmaster's plans for Potter – howsoever cruel, and barbaric they might be – was, in Dumbledore's mind, a most unworthy betrayal!

The use of certain means was an old disagreement that he and Minerva had always had. Dumbledore had a profound horror and loathing of the Dark Arts and their practitioners that few others had. He genuinely desired to ensure that the Dark Arts were lost and forgotten, with no one practising those forbidden arts. To achieve that end, Dumbledore was willing to do anything and everything in his power. If it meant sacrificing a few, so be it. While Minerva and many

other Light wizards shared his distaste for the Dark Arts, they drew the line at certain things. To them, the goal of destroying the Dark Arts didn't condone some of the methods used in the bargain.

Dumbledore reclined in his chair as he considered the fact that Harry Potter was now on better terms with Rosier, Greengrass and Goldstein than ever before. He would learn many things that Dumbledore had kept Harry ignorant of. But most worrisome would be the image that the Boy-Who-Lived would convey to the world. He could not become friends with the children of Albus' enemies! That just could not be allowed!

The old man rubbed a weary arm over his eyes as he considered the present situation. This was the second time Minerva had directly rebelled against him and intervened on Harry's side, and he had to count Minerva lost to him. She trusted her own judgement rather than Dumbledore's assurances that he had the situation well in control, and that he had only Harry's interests in mind, and the he would lookout for the boy. Dumbledore was fairly certain that she would continue to intervene on Harry's side whenever the situation warranted.

He wondered what he should do about Minerva. He had three options before him – do nothing, chastise her harshly, or kill her. The old headmaster considered all three of them carefully. Doing nothing was the safest for the moment – he still valued Minerva's abilities in other aspects and she was his strongest link to the Light purebloods. She could be counted on to help him in many ways, even if she was rebellious where Potter was concerned.

Chastising her harshly or removing her from Hogwarts would be a great move if he could pull it off. But removing an experienced Professor like Minerva was all but impossible. And even if he did manage it, she, being a very powerful Light witch, would probably rally the Light purebloods to her cause and become a greater nuisance than she was now. It was better to have a controllable problem than an uncontrollable one. Reducing her responsibilities inside Hogwarts would not prevent her from intervening on Harry Potter's behalf, and would only exacerbate the current situation by creating bad blood between himself and his deputy.

The final option – killing her – was something that merited a serious appraisal. On the face of it, it was the best solution. Minerva was Harry's staunchest ally inside Hogwarts, and removing her permanently had much to recommend in it. But the death of a witch of Minerva's calibre would bring enormous and unwanted attention on Hogwarts even if the death appeared natural or accidental, and that was something that the wily headmaster could ill afford at the moment, given his current plans with the Philosopher's Stone. Any of his teachers, in the event of Minerva's death, might blab about the Stone. One of Dumbledore's greatest disadvantages was that he often juggled a dozen balls at a time. If any of them fell to the ground, he could not easily pick it up back, because that would mean endangering the other eleven!

He sighed. However, there was a more important thing to attend to at the moment. Emmeline Vance. Before Minerva questioned the Healer, he needed to obviate her of the knowledge that it was Dumbledore who hinted to her that it was Harry's friends who had cursed the Boy-Who-Lived. He picked up a pinch of floo powder and tossed it into the fire, muttering 'Snape's office'. His head appeared in Snape's office and hailed the Potion master who was reading in his chair. He hailed the greasy haired man, "Severus, I want you to go and engage Minerva's attention for the next couple of hours. Keep her occupied for the time!"

Snape nodded, and Dumbledore's head disappeared from the fire. The wily headmaster tossed another pinch of floo powder, calling, "St. Mungo's Hospital!"

--(Scene Break)--

The next day, Harry and his group had assembled in one of the unused classrooms as was their wont in the days before the suspicions and insinuations had poisoned the atmosphere in the group. Now, however, House Potter was once more united, and even if they had lost time and energy in ascertaining themselves of each others' loyalties, they group was stronger for having restored confidence in each other. Harry began by publicly apologising to Rosier, Goldstein and Greengrass for suspecting them, and they

graciously waved them off and told him to concentrate on what really mattered.

Harry briefed Susan, Justin and Anthony about the situation that concerned him, and they fell to discussing who might be guilty. Harry began, "Now that we know everyone here's innocent of the attempts on me, who's guilty?" He continued, "Let's take the insomnia jinx first. Susan's found some interesting information on it. Susan, if you please."

The round-faced Hufflepuff girl spoke earnestly, "All jinxes need two essential pre-conditions to work. The first is proximity to the cursed object or person, and the second is the constant hatred needed to fuel it. Whoever cursed Harry had to have been close to him at Hogwarts all the time. And truly hate Harry."

"That does not leave a lot of people," murmured Goldstein.

"No, it doesn't. And I don't think any student's capable of such sustained hatred. Jinxes are among the hardest spells to cast correctly. They need constant hatred, and great skill in the Dark Arts," replied Susan.

"So who's been near Harry for the entire time?" questioned Millicent.

"Harry, what can you tell me of the insomnia?" inquired Daphne. "Was it the same every night?"

Harry thought carefully about her question. "No," he replied. "It became worse during the weekends, often coinciding with my scar acting up."

"Your scar is acting up?" Rosier remarked sharply.

Harry nodded, "Usually after Quirrell's lessons. He's teaching me some curses and it makes my scar throb worse than ever. But it's never been completely painless since before Yule."

Susan leant back in her chair and frowned. "Let's leave the question of who hates Harry for the moment. Let's take the jinx itself. My

family's got a superb library, and it could be found only in some obscure books. Remember, it deceived Mme. Pomfrey. That's not a common spell, or she'd have known how to detect and remove it."

"How did you check your family library from within Hogwarts?" questioned Justin.

"I didn't. I wrote to my auntie asking her if she knew any insomnia jinxes and she answered me, saying that it is a very obscure spell, known only to Dark arts specialists. She was able to find the spell."

There were nods of acquiescence all round, as Harry reasoned, "Susan's information removes most of the students from the list of suspects, and all first years definitely. We share few classes with other Houses and rarely mix, so who does that leave as suspects?"

Rosier murmured, "The teachers!"

Hermione looked affronted, but Harry nodded in hard lipped silence. From the moment he had been convinced of the innocence of his own group, and the difficulty of the jinx, he had been suspecting that it had come from one of the professors. After all, they were the only group who had regular contact with Harry Potter. Harry continued reasoning, "Yes – the teachers. We can, I think, remove McGonagall from the list of suspects. She has been helping us throughout the year, she helped us solve this very puzzle, and she has helped unite us again. We can also eliminate those teachers whose classes we don't take – Vector, Babbling, Kettleburn, Trelawney, and Burbage. They have very little contact with us. We can also ignore Binns, I think. I don't think a ghost can cast spells."

The others nodded in agreement, while Harry pursued his argument, "That leaves us with Sprout, Sinistra, Flitwick, Snape, and Quirrell. Which of them do you fancy as the culprit?"

Rosier murmured in his mild, grave voice, "Aren't we forgetting someone, Harry?"

Daphne nodded, "I see what you mean. Dumbledore."

“But Dumbledore has been helpful to Harry throughout this year,” objected Justin.

“Dumbledore wouldn’t do such a thing,” insisted Hermione vehemently. “He’s a great wizard!”

“Consider, Hermione, how high the ideals, how lofty the sentiments of every deceiver of note, until he is found out,” came the quiet rejoinder from Rosier.

Susan cut in, “Sak – there’s absolutely no evidence that Dumbledore is anywhere mixed up in this. Besides, Dumbledore and McGonagall are both strong Light mages.” She interpreted Daphne’s startled glance correctly and answered, “Yes, I know for sure that they are Light mages – I’ve seen them at High Summer. They are unlikely to indulge in Dark Magic, particularly something as nasty as a jinx for no real gain.”

“We’ll keep him on the list, but I don’t think it is likely to be him, Sak,” replied Harry thoughtfully. “I don’t think Dumbledore would risk being caught casting jinxes on the Boy-Who-Lived, if nothing else.”

Rosier didn’t reply to that, so Harry continued. “Sprout and Sinistra – well, I doubt that they are even capable of such subtle Dark Arts. I am not sure about Flitwick ...”

Susan interrupted, “Flitwick used to be a duelling champion in the olden days. He’s probably capable of the spell, but I don’t see him cursing a student.”

Tony nodded, “Neither do I.”

The others agreed, and Harry continued, “That leaves us two strong suspects – Quirrell and Snape, with two more unlikely possibilities – Dumbledore and Flitwick.” He looked at his audience, “Which is your pick?”

“Given that your insomnia became worse after Quirrell’s classes where you were performing curses – all of which require hatred to

fuel them, I am more inclined to suspect Quirrell, Harry," deduced Daphne.

"Why did he poison Harry, then?" questioned Justin.

"Who knows? Getting desperate, I suppose", replied Daphne.

"That won't work, Daph", commented Sakarbal. "The jinx was never meant to kill. It was meant to annoy, to confuse, to weaken perhaps, but never would the insomnia jinx have killed Harry. So – why poison?"

"Perhaps it was just preparation? So that the poison would be more effective?"

"But if he wanted to kill, why did he not use a lethal toxin? There was no need for such useless measures as an insomnia jinx," responded Rosier. "After all, the poison was quickly detected."

Harry interjected, "We're mixing up two separate incidents, people. Let's consider each one separately. We've no clue about the intentions behind the two events. Let us reconstruct the jinx – we'll come to the poison in due course."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "How can you be so calm, Harry? It could have been an attempt on your life!"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "What would you like me to do? Weep, wail and wring my hands about how dangerous things are?" He turned serious, "My only chance, Hermione, is to remain calm and discover what my enemies are up to."

Hermione gave an odd shudder, while Rosier, Greengrass and Bones all gave him approving glances. Now that Harry had recovered, his leadership qualities – charisma, calmness, logic, and decision – were becoming more and more apparent. As the others looked askance at him, he continued, "What proof have we about Quirrell? We know he lied about the troll and was probably involved in it somehow. My scar acting up after his special classes is strange, but as yet we don't

know what it actually means. That's all."

"What evidence have we about Snape? We know he hates me, we know he is proficient in the Dark Arts, and we know he would enjoy causing me pain. All things said and done, he is probably our best suspect."

Everyone agreed and Harry proceeded, "Let's take the poisoning attempt now. Tell us what you learnt about the poison from Emmeline Vance's report, Daphne." That morning, Harry had given Daphne Emmeline Vance's report and asked her to check if she could find anything of use in it.

The slender Slytherin girl complied. "The poison used was Coronel's green – a mild and common poison, usually found in colouring agents for cloth. I spoke to my mum and according to her, it would never have caused any permanent harm, even if it looked dangerous for a moment. Again, we can rule out all those previously ruled out, along with Flitwick. I simply cannot see Flitwick poisoning anyone. That leaves Dumbledore, Snape and Quirrell. Of the three, Snape has probably the best knowledge of poisons and the best access to poisons."

"If the plan were to annoy and unsettle you – not kill you – the poisoning attempt could also have been by Snape. Even with the insomnia, you were managing to keep things in order. The poisoning might have been to put you out of action for a few days", muttered Anthony.

"Quite true. And I think Snape is petty enough to seek a puerile vengeance against you, Harry" remarked Daphne.

Harry sighed – it didn't ring true. He murmured, "Snape would've wanted something more than just annoying me. I've no doubt he hates me, but he's been having his revenge in class. I get the feeling that he would have needed a stronger reason to actually try poisoning me. Besides, look at it from his point of view. No matter who poisons me, it's Snape who'll be suspected. Would he want to draw attention to himself like that just to get some vengeful satisfaction?"

"You're assuming that Snape has his hatred under control." remarked Justin. "We don't know what his self-control is like."

Rosier shook his head, "Snape's got the reputation of being a very powerful Dark wizard. Dark wizards require excellent self-control, or they'll run wild. Since Snape's not done that, we can be sure he's got good self-discipline."

Harry assented, as Susan spoke up, "That's true. So – we have come to a conclusion of sorts. Which is your choice? Snape or Quirrell?"

Harry frowned for a moment, "There is one other thing that's been worrying me. Unlikely as it is, there's no evidence that the person who cast the jinx was the one who poisoned me!"

"You mean there are two people in this castle who hate you enough to poison or curse you?" questioned Hermione incredulously.

"The theory may not be far fetched, Hermione," replied Susan slowly. "While Harry Potter may not have many enemies, the Boy-Who-Lived definitely has!"

Harry sighed, "I wish we had a bit more information. We'll start looking for it. We'll all meet tomorrow. Try to think of anything that might help." With that, the group dispersed and returned to their own Common Rooms. As they began walking away from the classroom they had been using for their meeting, Harry fell into step with Hermione. He whispered, "I think I should apologise to you as well. You were absolutely right – I should have talked to Sak and Daphne. It would have saved everyone a world of trouble."

The muggleborn girl blushed as Harry continued, "In future, if I am being stubborn, you know what to remind me of." Hermione smiled at that. "Oh Harry! You were not yourself what with being cursed. I am glad we all got through that bad time in one piece."

"As am I, Hermione," replied Harry soberly. He paused for a moment. "Hermione, I am glad that Daphne and Sak are not the culprits. I

really am. But their being not the culprits now places me in greater danger.”

“How so?

“Because I don't know who my enemy is!”

--(End of the Chapter)--

## The Roaring Snake – 23

### Draconic Problems

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am merely playing in the world created by JKR.

As usual, all criticism is welcome.

Harry's decision to focus on Quirrell and Snape yielded very little result. Harry and his friends, for all their diligence and focus, were unable to discern that either of them was upto anything. Quirrell still gave Harry lessons, and Snape still loathed him and made his life as uncomfortable as possible in the Potions class. But this was Snape's natural state, and as such, it was not particularly worthy of excitement. Anthony theorised that whoever had cursed Harry had decided to lie low for a time. Two curses on him in a short period might be dangerous for the perpetrator, so whoever it was was biding his time until another chance became available to assault the Boy-Who-Lived.

January passed uneventfully, except for the fact he received his Yule gifts from Rosier, Greengrass and Goldstein and Narcissa Malfoy. The gifts were something that Harry would come to treasure and cherish. Narcissa had sent him the bond pertaining to the debt of his uncle's company. It also indicated the compromise she had reached with his uncle's superior and what he could expect next summer. The Rosiers, the Greengrasses and the Goldsteins had given him a journal that he could use to communicate with them. Harry had only to drip three drops of blood on it and it would become attuned to him – no one but him could read what was written there or write in the journal. He could write in it and they would be able to read it and respond – Rosier, Goldstein and Greengrass all had identical journals and what was written in one appeared in all. Now, Harry had a sure way of contacting them over summer.

Rosier however warned him to use the journal only in an emergency. For one thing, using it constantly would increase the risk of being caught with it. For another, whenever he used the journal, there was a risk of someone intercepting the message. It was not likely, Rosier pointed out, especially inside a place like Hogwarts where there was

too much magic to be monitored. But if he used it in a place like his uncle's and if someone was monitoring magic there, he might get caught.

"D'you mean the Ministry frowns on the use of magic like this?"

"No. It's quite acceptable for us to use this kind of magic over the holidays. It's just ..." his voice faded away.

"Yes?"

"You're the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry," Rosier sighed wearily. "There may be any number of people interested in you. So, I'd rather assume you're being watched all the time."

That had sobered up Harry. Harry had managed to give them presents as well, but his presents were nowhere nearly as powerful, valuable or useful as his. "Thanks", he whispered fervently to Rosier. Maybe next year we'll be able to give each other gifts in time. This time you'd have had to come to St. Mungo to give it to me."

Rosier, Greengrass and Goldstein stared at him in surprise. "Harry, we did come to St. Mungo when you were ill," answered Greengrass. She proceeded to narrate their bitter and humiliating experience there. Harry stared at her in horror. "I never knew you'd come there. I certainly didn't refuse to meet you!"

"Moody!" breathed Rosier. "He probably answered for you. Perhaps he – forgot – to inform you what he had told us!"

"But why'd Moody chase you out?"

"Moody hates dark' families, Harry. He probably deemed it inappropriate for us to visit you."

Harry nodded, but it didn't fit the whole puzzle. There was something he was missing here. Moody's solicitude and zeal, while commendable – at least from the old auror's point of view – was rather strange when he thought about it.

The other bit of news he had had was from McGonagall. She had stopped him after a transfiguration class, and told him of her interview with Emmeline Vance. "Harry, I've just spoken to Emmeline. She claimed that she had heard rumours of you mixing with members of Dark families. Her words, she claimed, were meant to warn you of the dangers of such activities. She said she never meant that first years had cursed you."

Harry thanked her for the information, but once more, there were pieces of the puzzle missing. Emmeline, when she spoke, had given him the impression she was speaking of definite people she wanted to warn him about. It was far from a general warning. Once more, he had the impression that there were many missing steps. He hinted as much to McGonagall. The elderly transfiguration professor had nodded. "I got the impression that she clearly didn't remember who told her of you mixing with Dark families. Given the words she spoke to you, it is very strange that she does not remember. I will look a bit more into it during Beltane, when I will be meeting her again."

--(Scene Break)--

The first break in monotony came when Harry and Millicent decided to visit Hagrid on a sleepy Saturday in February. Harry liked the giant gamekeeper of Hogwarts – he was one who could make him comfortable without any fanfare. Hagrid saw Harry Potter as Harry Potter and that was what made him fond of the big gamekeeper. Millicent was as interested in magical creatures as Hagrid himself, so she and Hagrid got on pretty well. The others didn't share this affinity, so it was the duo who chose to frequent Hagrid's hut.

Harry ran his eyes casually, until he saw a large oval shape in the fire, which Hagrid had built up more massively than usual. "Hagrid, what on earth is that?!"

Millicent's attention had been drawn by Harry's surprised remark, and she recognised the shape. "Merlin! That's a dragon egg! Where on earth did you get it?"

"Got it fer some unicorn horn last night." Millicent and Harry exchanged a glance. Harry cut in with a distinct cough. "Hagrid, I thought that raising dragons is illegal."

Hagrid looked distinctly uncomfortable with the line taken by Harry, and Millicent agreed with Harry in tight lipped silence. "Hagrid, what happens if someone finds out about this?"

"No one comes t'my hut excep' yeh two" Hagrid said defensively. "So, if yeh hold yer tongues, no one'll know!"

"We'll keep our mouths shut, what'll you do in a few weeks?"

Hagrid took no notice of him. He was merrily stoking the fire.

--(Scene Break)--

The hatching of a dragon egg was not something that most people could claim to have seen and it was this event which had interested every one of Harry's group. They had all trudged down to Hagrid's hut in the snow, on a February evening.

The hatching was far less exotic and spectacular than they had brought themselves to believe. A little dragon toppled out of the cracked shell and sneezed out a few sparks of fire. Nevertheless, it was an interesting experience, and they were all chatting about it, when they heard a slight scratching noise at the window

."Eh – what is that?" echoed Anthony.

Harry leapt up and saw a figure, who had been peeping in through the window. At Hagrid's cry, the figure at the window leapt back and streaked off towards the school. Harry, who had the best reflexes of everyone, reacted first. He ran to the door, wrenched it open and saw the running figure, clutching something in his hand. But Harry had no difficulty in recognising who it had been. Draco Malfoy. But it was not Draco himself who interested Harry most. It was what he was carrying in his hand. Even at the distance, he had no trouble realising what it was – after all, he owned one of those. "An invisibility cloak!"

muttered Harry. "No wonder he was able to follow us without any of us noticing him!"

--(Scene Break)--

Draco Malfoy had been more than a little outraged when House Potter had stuck by Harry. He was even more furious that Sakarbal Rosier and Daphne Greengrass were still staying with Harry Potter rather than follow him. Draco regarded himself as the de facto leader of the purebloods in the school – at least, everyone in his year should regard him as the leader. But dammit! His own godbrother and his second cousin were still following his rival, his enemy. The purebloods belonged to Draco and Harry was poaching on his flock, luring them away. Consequently, Draco had a lot of antipathy for Harry Potter. Anything that diminished his rival was to be savoured.

Draco had followed the injunctions of Narcissa in letter at least, if not in spirit. She had sternly forbidden him from attacking Harry Potter and his group, physically or magically. She had warned him that the consequences of disregarding her warning would be disastrous. However, there was a loophole in her orders – she had not prohibited Draco from spying on Harry, and this the blond Slytherin ponce was doing with sinister relish. If he found Harry doing something illegal, he could and would get the Boy-Who-Lived in as much trouble as possible!

Draco had been diligent and meticulous in his spying. He had brought one of his father's invisibility cloaks, and consequently, he had no fear of being caught by Potter or his friends. He had invested an enormous amount of his free waking time, spying on Harry Potter

When he saw Harry Potter, and his friends all tramp down to Hagrid's hut, he had become intrigued. Rosier and Greengrass had no interest in the stupid gamekeeper, nor in any of his 'pets'. So what were they all doing in Hagrid's hut? Draco had followed them in his invisibility cloak, but had been unable to get in. Therefore he had had recourse to the window. But the windows of Hagrid's hut had been built for the half giant's height and unfortunately, to reach the window ledge and peep in, the pureblood prince had had to take off his invisibility cloak. Cursing and sweating, he struggled up to the ledge. One look told

him all he wanted to know. He saw everything he needed to see. Harry's group and that oaf crowded round a dragon. He jumped off the window and ran towards the school.

--(Scene Break)--

Hagrid had commanded all of them to leave immediately, since there might be trouble. While they all understood why this might be, the two muggleborn were still completely lost. However, they obeyed him and swiftly made their way back to an unused classroom, collapsing on the chairs.

Millicent's normally florid face was now ashen beneath. "Goddess! We are in trouble now!" she breathed.

"Why so?" Harry's almost indifferent calm was excruciatingly annoying.

Millicent shot back "Because Malfoy saw us with the dragon."

"Why does that matter?" inquired Justin, all at sea, looking bewildered at the pale, drawn faces of Rosier, Greengrass, Bones and Bulstrode.

"Because dragons are illegal and more so because dragons are represented by House Malfoy!"

"But why does that matter, Millie?" asked Harry.

Millicent looked for a long moment at the Potter scion, not knowing if he was so ignorant or whether he was mocking. But she shook off the latter suspicion – Harry would never mock anything so important or serious. "Harry, have you never wondered about the significance of House emblems? Have you never wondered why the Noble Houses choose the symbols they do? After all, the Potter House symbol is the griffon!"

"I thought it had to do with heraldry and ..."

"Merlin! The creatures represent alliances the Houses hold!" burst out Susan.

Harry could have slammed his head into a wall. The thought had never occurred to him. His face must have proclaimed as much, as Millicent sighed and began her explanation, "All Noble Houses have on their crests the beings that they have a pact with. The Houses are expected to represent the interests of the beings they have a compact with in human circles, and in turn, these beings help the Noble Houses in various ways. Usually, there is at least one of these magical creatures on the estates of the Noble Houses."

"So – if the Houses make an agreement with ..." began Hermione.

"Again, you don't understand. The Noble Houses do not make treaties with the magical creatures – it is the other way round. The magical creatures make covenants with the Noble House that is most similar, most acceptable to their own values. For instance, the Lestranges have been phenomenal healers since a couple of hundred years. So, unicorns have been attracted by their values."

"So these creatures serve ..." started Justin, only to be interrupted by the corpulent Slytherin girl once more. "Merlin's beard!" expostulated Millicent. "Of course not! The creatures are loosely allied with the Noble Houses. That is all."

"Why do the magical creatures make treaties at all?" asked Hermione.

"I guess you never heard of the British Magical Creature Covenant of 1748?" asked Millicent.

When Harry, Hermione and Justin shook their heads in mute denial, she explained, "By the late seventeenth century, muggles started becoming too strong for magical creatures. They began to invade virgin tracts of land, converting it into arable or pasture land, or areas to build new settlements. Magical creatures were being squeezed out, and they tried to fight back against these muggle invaders. However, they were totally outmatched, and suffered a humiliating defeat. Besides, our Ministry was desperately trying to keep the existence of our world and the magical creatures secret, so they stepped in to hunt down those creatures that might expose our world."

Millicent took a deep breath and continued, “To make a long story short, the magical creatures realised that there was no hope of a victory against the muggles and the Ministry, and they approached the Noble Houses – which owned the largest areas of undisturbed magical lands – to allow them to settle on their estates. This was granted and the more intelligent, useful and powerful of the magical creatures made pacts with the Noble Houses that were closest to their own ideals and values, agreeing to help them in exchange for these Houses representing the creatures' interests. The Ministry, terrified that one single House might gain the allegiance of all the magical creatures imposed a restriction that every Noble House might represent the interests of only one magical species, while allying itself with the most dangerous creatures of all – the Dementors . Thus we have the present system.”

“And now?” asked Harry.

Millicent continued simply, “Things have changed only for the worse, Harry. Humans are too strong for them. They needed wizarding allies to represent their interests. Humans far outnumber them, and any war would, for these beings, be suicidal. Forests, glades grasslands, and even aerial and aquatic environments are shrinking, poisoned, and dying off. They need their natural habitats, and some of the best environments were – and still are – on the private estates of these Noble Houses.”

“So what creatures have made a treaty with your family?”

Millicent shook her head. “The Bulstrodes are not a Noble family. On my mother's side, however, the Crouches are a Noble family, and their allies are Thunderbirds.”

Something stirred in Harry's memory. He had read about the crests in the book given him by Narcissa – the one which spoke of the greatness of the various pureblood families. He inquired, “So all Noble families have their own allies amongst the magical creatures?”

“All of them do,” nodded Millicent. She continued, ticking off on her fingers, “The Blacks have the occamy, the Bones have the gargoyle, the Greengrasses have the dendroids, the Rosiers have the krakens,

the Notts the thestrals, the Selwyns have the firecrabs, the Rookwoods have the sphinx, the McKinnons have the phoenix, the MacDougals have the minotaurs, the Wilkes the gorgons, the McGonagalls the pegasi, and so forth," she finished.

There was a moment's silence before Harry pulled himself back to the present with an effort. "Okay, people, let's concentrate on what Malfoy can or will do. He can go to Snape or Dumbledore ..."

"He won't," Rosier answered quietly.

"Oh! I suppose he's going to keep his mouth shut from the kindness of his heart?" remarked Justin sarcastically.

"No, he won't do that either. He'll go to his father," replied Daphne gravely.

The others looked at her quizzically, so she explained further, "Lucius Malfoy is the representative of the dragons inside Britain. It's his family fief, if you like. Since we're involved in raising a dragon ..."

Here a storm of protests interrupted her, but she held up her hand. "I know we're not, but you can bet that that'll be the story he'll accept, since it'll come from Draco. Since we're involved in raising a dragon, he'll be the one to pronounce judgement on us and we can look forward to being at his mercy." She gave an odd shudder.

"And Hagrid?" questioned Harry.

"Hagrid'll be lucky if he escapes Azkaban. Which I'm almost sure he won't," returned Susan grimly. "At the very least, he'll lose his job."

Harry was thinking furiously. An idea suddenly occurred to him. "Millie, your mum – can't she take the dragon over from us?"

Millicent frowned, "I think so But how'll we persuade Hagrid to give up the dragon?"

"Leave that to me. I'll talk to Hagrid," returned Harry Potter.

“Do we even have time for this?” asked Hermione, who was pale as a sheet. “Malfoy could have gone to his father by now?”

“Well – no,” answered Rosier slowly. “Lucius and Narcissa are away today. They'll be back tomorrow evening.”

“How'll you get the dragon to Mrs. Bulstrode, Harry?” asked Hermione. “No human, not a student, governor, or teacher of Hogwarts, can cross the wards without the permission of the headmaster. I read it in *Hogwarts: A History*”

“The wards don't stop us from leaving the grounds, do they? If she waits at the edge of the grounds, I can get the dragon to her,” replied Harry.

“And just how do you plan to do that without being caught? If I know anything at all, Draco will be under his invisibility cloak watching the dragon every minute now. He knows we saw him and he knows we'll try to get rid of the dragon now.” responded Daphne.

Harry smiled tightly. “Draco isn't the only one with an invisibility cloak. I've got one as well!” He drew his invisibility cloak from a pocket of his robes and tossed it on the table before him to the astonishment of his friends. “I can sneak up to Hagrid's hut and get the dragon and take it to the edge of the grounds.”

“That won't work, Harry,” objected Rosier. “All creatures allied to the family have a blood bond with the family members. Even if he cannot see you, Draco will sense the dragon – as long as the dragon has blood in its veins, he can sense it. Once you have the dragon, he will be able to follow you. He may not be able to pin-point you, but he will be able to localise you inside a few yards. And he will catch you when you emerge from the cloak to give the dragon to Mrs. Bulstrode.”

Harry stopped short. He realised that there was no way to escape if they didn't thoroughly discredit Malfoy's story. And as for letting Malfoy catch him handing over the dragon to Mrs. Bulstrode, he shuddered at that. It was too horrible to contemplate. There was no way to fight this directly. Directly? Direction? Misdirection? Suddenly,

an idea occurred to him, and he turned to his friends. He questioned Sakarbal, "How far away can Malfoy sense a dragon?"

"Well, it really depends on the magic in the dragon's blood. An adult dragon can be sensed a hundred yards away. Since this is a newly hatched one, I don't think he would be able to sense it at more than ten yards."

"Excellent!" returned Harry. "I've a plan!" And he began to explain. It took them some more time to fine tune it, but by the end of the session, they had emerged with a very concrete and well-analysed scheme.

--(Scene Break)--

The next day, Draco had set up a vigil under his invisibility cloak outside Hagrid's hut, to make sure that the dragon was still inside. He had not been able to sense the dragon from outside the hut, so he had risked a peek inside and had observed with relief that the dragon was still there. Well, he only had to stay on guard outside this ramshackle until evening, when his father would return and in one fell stroke, Draco would be able to get rid of Potter, and that oafish gamekeeper, along with any of Potter's friends who were stupid enough to accompany him. Further, it would put the Rosiers and Greengrasses at his father's and his own mercy. Draco enjoyed lording it over others, and he could savour in anticipation, the glee of getting Sakarbal and Daphne fall in line behind him.

Around late afternoon, he saw Susan and Harry make their way to Hagrid's hut. They were inside for a good half an hour, but Draco could not hear what was going on inside. Finally, they emerged and Draco heard Susan whisper furiously to Harry, "Harry, please! You can't be thinking of getting the dragon away. You'll be expelled!"

"We've got no choice, Sue," returned Harry decisively. "It's too late to change the time or place now. We're doing it at midnight."

Draco could hardly contain his glee. So Potter was going to try and get rid of the dragon at midnight. This was even better than he thought! To catch Potter in the act of smuggling a dragon on the

grounds of Hogwarts would discredit Harry Potter forever. Not even Dumbledore would be able to save his golden boy now! He resolved to stay on until that night there. He ran back to the school, grabbed his camera to photograph Potter's smuggling activities, penned a short message to his father to meet him in the school at midnight and sent it via his owl and ran back to his vigil spot. He had hinted that it involved dragons and Harry Potter and was very important. His father would be sure to come! He risked another peek, and nothing inside had changed. The dragon, that would cover Draco with glory, was still there!

--(Scene Break)--

While Harry and Susan were arguing with Hagrid, Daphne and Hermione were both sweating profusely from the fumes of the potion they had just brewed. The pureblood girl ran a weary arm over her brow, as she poured the contents of the cauldron into a small crystal vial. She smiled approvingly at the muggleborn girl, "You're very good at Potions."

Hermione blushed, "I'm not as good as you."

"Given time and effort, I'm almost certain you'll be. It's just that I have had a bit more experience than you. In fact, my mum's going to be holding Potions classes for all promising students over summer. Would you like to join?"

"Of course," answered Hermione enthusiastically. Hermione was always interested in classes, and seasons and teachers made no difference to her.

"Then I'll get back to you with the details," returned Daphne. The blond Slytherin girl finished decanting the contents of the cauldron and stoppered the vial with a cork. She sighed, "After all the trouble we have been to, Harry Potter's plan had better work."

The Gryffindor girl sighed sadly, "I'm still unhappy about this. But Malfoy's leaving us no choice."

Daphne nodded, "It's one of the prices of being a friend of Harry Potter. But he's a good planner and he knows what to do to succeed."

"I certainly hope so," murmured Hermione.

Having finished their work, they thoroughly eliminated all the evidence. The cauldron was cleaned by Rosier and Goldstein with magic trace removing charms. The ingredients were all neatly pushed back onto the student cupboards, and the tripod and the floor about the cauldrons were similarly treated by the two Ravenclaws. That done, the four retreated to their common rooms, with Daphne carrying the potion they had just created.

--(Scene Break)--

Students assembled for supper, and Daphne, instead of her usual place with Potter and his friends, took her place at the Slytherin table next to Crabbe. Draco Malfoy was not at the table at all.

As the dishes began filling up, Harry looked hard at Daphne and nodded. The Slytherin girl returned his nod with a minute inclination of her head. Quietly, Harry drew his wand under the table, pointing it at Sakarbal's goblet, whispered a pushing hex. The goblet toppled off the table and shattered loudly, spraying the pumpkin juice everywhere. Everyone jumped at the noise, and people from the far tables were craning their necks to see what had happened.

Minerva admonished from the head table, "Do watch what you are doing, Mr. Rosier."

"Sorry, Professor," apologised the Ravenclaw.

No one had seen the cold smile that had lit up the face of Harry Potter. Daphne had been successful.

--(Scene Break)--

A short time after supper, Goyle ran into Prof. Snape's office. "Professor! You've got to come! It's Crabbe! He's ill!" blurted out the big Slytherin.

Snape, rose to his feet, and hurried off after the thickset pureblood boy, wondering just what had happened to Crabbe.

From beneath his invisibility cloak, Harry watched as Snape ran towards the Slytherin Common Room. Once the greasy haired Potions Master was out of sight, Harry silently slipped into the office. His time in Snape's office was limited. He thanked his stars that all the bottles and glass containers containing various ingredients were neatly arranged on the shelves, and clearly labelled. In less than a couple of minutes, Harry had found what he needed. He quickly slipped the three glass phials into his robes and disappeared once more beneath his invisibility cloak.

--(Scene Break)--

Draco had taken up an observation post a good twenty yards away from the path, in the shadow of a large elm tree. The last thing he wanted was for someone walking on the path to stumble on him. It would lead to all kinds of awkward questions about his possession of a proscribed item. From his position, he could easily keep both the door and the window – the only ingress and egress from the hut – well under observation. He would also be in an excellent position to follow anyone emerging from the hovel.

Draco's vigilance was well rewarded. At a quarter to midnight, Draco was startled by rap on Hagrid's door. "Who's there?" called the gamekeeper.

"It's me, Harry. Let me in, so I can get out from beneath this cloak!" called a disembodied voice. Draco was jolted! So, Potter owned an invisibility cloak, did he? That was interesting! Invisibility cloaks were illegal in schools. Potter would get in more trouble than ever before now!

A few moments, later, the door opened, and Harry was ushered inside. He was not inside for long. A few minutes later, he came out carrying a box. Draco could sense the dragon magic coming strongly from the box. The savage of a gamekeeper was blubbering as he helped Potter cover himself with the invisibility cloak. He kept

whimpering goodbyes to his dragon! Draco chuckled inwardly – soon the oaf would be whimpering goodbyes to his job! Potter covered himself with the cloak, and to Draco's surprise, started back slowly towards the school. What the hell was Potter up to?

However, there was naught to do but follow Potter and he was able to sense the dragon and thus easily follow Potter back towards the school. To Draco's greater astonishment, Potter took the path towards Gryffindor tower, and soon they turned into the corridor leading to Professor McGonagall's office.

Harry, had been walking slowly, making sure that Draco was following him. It was his intention to lead Malfoy on a long wild goose chase, give Susan enough time to accomplish her part of the task, make his way to a secret entrance that very few knew about, and sneak back to the Hufflepuff dorms via that route, leaving Malfoy to puzzle over where he had disappeared. As far as Harry was concerned, it was a perfect vengeance for Draco's trying to get into trouble. A lost night's sleep and no profit was what the Slytherin ponce deserved. However, things would take a very different turn.

As ill luck would have it, that night, McGonagall had transformed into her cat form, and was relishing her freedom in her animagus shape. Normally, in her human form, she would never have heard them passing her office, but in her feline guise, she had superb hearing, and detected her footsteps past her office. Immediately, she transformed back to her natural form, and came out to investigate who was out of bed in the dead of the night. When the door opened and the professor rushed out, the sudden light from inside the room dazzled both of them. Harry had the wit to keep his head and the reflexes of a natural quidditch player to carefully and noiselessly jump out of her way and sidestep the armour stands in front of her office, but Draco intent on following Harry, and distracted by the sudden light in McGonagall's office gave an involuntary cry and stumbled into one of the armour stands. It crashed to the ground with a deafening clang. To make matters worse, his invisibility cloak slipped off his head, and McGonagall caught sight of the head suddenly appearing from nowhere. Draco yelped and tried to run, grabbing his cloak in his free arm, but McGonagall had wordlessly summoned him to her. "Draco

Malfoy!" she exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing here at this time of the night?"

As she grabbed him, her hands had clasped part of his invisibility cloak as well. Surprised at the texture of the material she felt beneath her fingers, she conjured a powerful light with a wave of her wand and perceived his invisibility cloak. "An invisibility cloak! Where did you get this? And what were you doing with it?" demanded the professor in anger.

"You don't understand, Professor!" whined Draco Malfoy. "Harry Potter's here with a dragon. He's smuggling it!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies, Malfoy?! Come on, we are going to see the headmaster about this!"

Malfoy was reduced to a pitiable wreck, gibbering in terror, as he trooped after the transfiguration professor.

From less than a dozen yards away, Harry had watched in helplessly and in horror Malfoy's predicament. From the moment McGonagall had caught Malfoy, Harry knew that there was nothing more for him to do. It had been no part of his design to get Malfoy into deep trouble, but fate, that ironical interloper, had taken a hand in this evil game.

As McGonagall began dragging Malfoy to Dumbledore, Harry didn't wait to hear more. He walked away as fast as he could without alerting anyone and made his way to the front door. Making sure no one was observing him, he opened it. Susan Bones stood there. "Well?" he asked her.

"All fine, Harry. Let's go," the girl whispered.

Harry threw the invisibility cloak on her and they first sneaked down to the dungeons, where Harry put back the three phials of dragon blood that he had purloined earlier that night. They had certainly served their purpose. That done, the two Hufflepuffs quickly made their way back to their own dorms.

--(Scene Break)--

While McGonagall was collaring Malfoy and hauling him off to the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore had been graced by the presence of Lucius Malfoy. Dumbledore politely greeted him and pressed some wine and other refreshments on the haughty pureblood. Finally, he inquired, “What brings you here at this unearthly hour, Lucius?” Dumbledore already knew – or rather had guessed – why Lucius had come to the school that night. The headmaster had Harry Potter under surveillance every moment and he was aware of everything going on around the Boy-Who-Lived. Consequently, he had been aware of Harry’s plan about the dragon and had also surmised what Draco was planning. As far as the headmaster was concerned, this development was excellent. It would increase the problems between Harry and the Malfoys and would make cooperation between them more difficult. Therefore, he was content to sit back and let them fight it out. If Harry managed to get the dragon away from Hogwarts deceiving Draco, it would make Malfoy more resentful of Potter and he would bias Slytherin more strongly against the Boy-Who-Lived. If, on the other hand, Harry was caught by Draco, Harry’s reputation would grievously suffer and it would be interesting to see how Harry would deal with that complication. Would his friends stand by him? Who would turn against him? All these would be interesting to observe; hence, the headmaster had not intervened one way or the other. He had never considered the possibility that Draco might get caught by a teacher and cause complications for the ponce!

In reply to Albus’ query, Lucius replied grandly “You see, Albus, there are some very worrying occurrences going on in the school,” Dumbledore politely waited for the Malfoy patriarch to continue, and he was not disappointed as Malfoy continued, “It has come to my notice that there are people in this school who are illegally raising dragons.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose at that. He returned mildly, “Dragons, Lucius? One would imagine that it is hard to keep dragons in this castle without anyone noticing.”

“I did not say they are keeping dragons in the castle, Albus. I said elements of this school are raising them.”

“Who are those people you refer to? And where are the dragons?

“In a few minutes, my son will be here with the culprits. We shall be able to find the dragons then!”

There was nothing more to be said and the two men settled down to wait in silence, both absorbed in their own thoughts. They had not long to wait. There was a sharp rap on the door, and with Dumbledore's permission, the door opened ushering in the small frame of Draco Malfoy followed by the tall stern figure of Minerva McGonagall.

Both Dumbledore and Lucius stared in stupefaction at the newcomers, the latter also in consternation. Dumbledore recovered first, and his impish sense of humour was tickled. He remarked in surprise, “Minerva! Please tell me you haven't been raising dragons in the school!”

“Albus?!” Minerva was perplexed. “What have dragons to do with me?”

Dumbledore explained, “Lucius here assures me that his son would be bringing in the culprits who were raising dragons in the school. Since young Mr. Malfoy is bringing you in, I take it he suspects you of raising dragons in the school!”

Everyone stared at Dumbledore in horror as the old man continued smoothly, “I assume Mr. Malfoy, that you have concrete evidence against my transfiguration teacher. It is a grave charge to accuse a Professor of!”

Minerva's patience was at an end, and her Scottish brogue rattled. “Mr. Malfoy is not bringing me in! I am bringing Mr. Malfoy in! I caught him prowling the corridors after curfew with an invisibility cloak!”

“Draco!” Mr. Malfoy spoke for the first time. “Please explain this!”

“Harry Potter was bringing a dragon with him, father. I was following him when Professor McGonagall caught me!”

“What utter rot!” snapped Minerva. “You should be ashamed of yourself for telling such lies!”

“Come, come, Minerva. Let Mr. Malfoy explain. You say Mr. Potter was raising dragons, Mr. Malfoy? Where was he raising them?”

“At Hagrid's hut.”

“Let's check Hagrid's hut, then,” suggested Dumbledore. Minerva had been looking more and more angry and disapproving of the entire proceeding, when Malfoy blurted out, “It's not in Hagrid's hut anymore.”

“Oh! Potter swallowed the dragons, I suppose?” Minerva was being witheringly sarcastic.

“The dragon was in Hagrid's hut, when Potter took it away tonight. I was following him, when Professor McGonagall caught me!” yelled Draco in desperation.

That stopped all of them. Minerva was looking ready to erupt. “Was there anyone else around Mr. Malfoy when you caught him, Minerva?” asked Dumbledore.

“Of course not! There was no one except Mr. Malfoy!” bristled Minerva.

“So where are your dragons, Mr. Malfoy?” Dumbledore's voice had just the delicate edge to push Malfoy beyond the limits of caution.

“Ask Potter! Potter'll know! Or his friends will!” There was a mad look on Draco's face and he was becoming more and more hysterical.

Dumbledore sighed wearily. “Minerva, may I trouble you to bring Harry Potter and his bunch of friends?”

“Albus, surely you don't credit this outrageous claim?”

“My son's claims are not outrageous, Prof. McGonagall! I demand to have Potter and his friends investigated thoroughly!”

"We need to investigate, Minerva. Please get them here. Fetch Severus as well, since Mr. Malfoy is his student."

--(Scene Break)--

The students were all fetched as was Professor Snape. The latter arrived first, as Minerva had to bring all the students together with her.

"Potter! What did you do with the dragon?" roared Malfoy as soon as they all entered the headmaster's office.

Harry languidly raised a quizzical eyebrow at Snape, and questioned, "Is he often like this?"

"Why you insolent ..! Snape rose to his feet in a fury, his fingers curled, only to be firmly pushed back into his chair by McGonagall who had taken a step forward and covered Harry. "Control yourself, Severus! I won't have you manhandling students in my presence!"

In the meantime, Harry had continued in the same languid voice, "Did you rouse me in the dead of the night just to listen to Professor Snape's rantings, headmaster?" He pronounced the 'Professor' with such a singular expression of contempt that McGonagall flinched.

Snape was looking murderous, but Dumbledore cut in smoothly, "No, Harry, we wished to ask you a few questions."

"Pray do so, sir, I wish to get back to bed. "

"Where is the dragon you took from Hagrid's hut, Potter?" questioned Lucius softly. Apparently, Draco had explained the situation to his father in Minerva's absence.

Harry however, remained unmoved by the question. "Is there a dragon in Hagrid's hut?" Harry parried the question with a question.

"You should know better, Potter, considering that you visit him often!"

“If he's got a dragon, he's managed to hide it with amazing skill. I didn't see any dragon when I visited him.”

“Oh! And when did you visit him?”

“Today.”

“And why did you visit him?” came the question from Lucius.

“To talk to him.”

“And what did you talk about?”

“My conversations with Hagrid must remain private, Lord Malfoy.” Harry's words, decorous as they were, held an undercurrent of warning.

“Did your conversations have anything to do with dragons?”

“Merlin!” Harry threw up his hands in mock surrender. “What is it with you all and dragons? I've got better things to think of than those overgrown flame breathing lizards!” It was testimony to how much the Malfoys had tested the patience of the teachers that none of them rebuked Harry for what was an outright piece of insolence.

“Harry, have you been raising dragons in the school, as Mr. Malfoy claims?” asked Dumbledore.

“Certainly not!” replied Harry truthfully.

“Tell the truth, Potter!” yelled Draco. “You were carrying the dragon beneath your invisibility cloak tonight, were you not?”

“Definitely not,” returned Harry honestly, once more. He had only been carrying a few quarts of dragon blood beneath his invisibility cloak.

“But you don't deny you have an invisibility cloak!” Lucius pounced on his words.

“No.”

“That is a proscribed item, headmaster!” announced Lucius, turning to the headmaster.

“In Harry's case, considering his special security requirements, it has been permitted Lucius. I have a clearance from the DMLE permitting him to keep his invisibility cloak with him” replied Dumbledore.

“Where were you tonight, Potter?” questioned Snape.

“With Susan Bones, Professor. We were talking together. And she can confirm it.” The Hufflepuff girl nodded in assent.

“What about the rest of them?” demanded Snape.

“None of us were carrying dragons under invisibility cloaks, professor” answered Rosier in a tone of weary patience. Some of his irritation was boiling over. It was even true. Susan Bones had taken the dragon from Hagrid's hut to the edge of the wards without any invisibility cloak!

Dumbledore cut in, “Minerva, since there is no evidence that any of these students were involved in any wrong doing, I think, you would do well to escort them to their beds. And you, Mr. Malfoy, will lose a hundred points for Slytherin and serve a week's detention for being out of bed, carrying a proscribed item, and making false accusations against your classmates. Severus will arrange your detentions. And you, Mr. Malfoy, will apologise to all these students at supper tomorrow. That is all, I think.”

--(Author's Note)--

My version of the Norbert business. I have introduced several new concepts in this chapter. At least, concepts that I have never seen before.

The second bit that is important here is that the leader finally awakens in Harry. He concocts a plot that draws on the skills of several of his friends. I have rarely seen a Harry shows clear headed

planning, meticulous implementation and/or ruthless calculation. There are some exceptions to it – like the stories by BigDonaDiet, but by and large, the planning is non-existent and implementation usually only superficial. The whole is truly greater than the sum of the parts if one can manage it!

Thanks to my Beta readers, Abstract Error and Voice of the Nephilim for their insightful remarks.

## The Roaring Snake – 24

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR. As usual, all criticism is welcome.

### Rehabilitation and Diplomacy

The news that Malfoy had lost them a hundred points in a nighttime escapade sent shock waves running through the Slytherins. No longer was the blond Slytherin prince a darling of the House, the peck order of the Slytherin House had turned topsy turvy in less than a few hours, and now Draco Malfoy was at the bottom of the new order. The next morning, Draco hurried down to the Common room, trying for once to avoid attention from others, but he found it impossible. A harsh voice of a third year called out a tripping hex and sent Malfoy barreling into a fifth year. Now even in the ordinary times, careening into a fifth year was a bad idea. But now, with Malfoy in so much disfavour, the results were far more unpleasant. The older boy simply elbowed Malfoy so savagely that he crashed heavily back into the Common room wall. A jeering laugh from the others greeted him, while the prefect looked on in utter unconcern. Malfoy opened his mouth to protest to the prefects, but saw the suppressed fury in the eyes of the girl, and without a word stalked off towards the classes. Only Pansy and his two gorillas followed Malfoy.

It was Daphne and Millicent who brought this news to Harry, leading Harry and his group into an impromptu discussion of what had transpired. Daphne was coldly satisfied with the development – she looked on in disapproval at the antics of her House mates, but had no real sympathy for Malfoy's fate. Millicent was much more gleeful – she had long suffered under Malfoy's taunts and disdain and she was glad of an opportunity to get her own back on the blond Slytherin ponce. Hermione initiated the discussion, “Harry, you said you wouldn't do anything to hurt Malfoy!” she half-accused.

“And I didn't,” returned Harry, proceeding to narrate the whole story of how it had happened that Malfoy had been caught. “It was just his bad luck that he got caught by McGonagall. I could do nothing to help him.”

“Help him!” echoed Millicent incredulously. “Why in Merlin's name would you want to help him?”

“Ah – that was an expression of speech,” chuckled Harry.

“So what can he do?” asked Susan

“Very little, I would say,” replied Rosier thoughtfully. “He'll probably try to lie low, and avoid attention. Any 'interest' his House may show in him will be detrimental to him.”

“The more important question,” smiled Anthony, “is what should we do?”

“What do you mean? We should put down Malfoy now!” answered Millicent.

“We can't go baiting Malfoy, even if we don't like him,” flared up rule-abiding Hermione at once.

Harry's mind was working overtime at the moment. There were several options that he could glean in the current circumstances. The dark haired Hufflepuff leant back in his chair and spoke distantly, “Correct me if I am wrong, but we have three options, I think. We can do nothing and keep away from the whole ugliness, hammer Malfoy as hard as we can, or be kind to Malfoy.”

The others all nodded, and Harry continued, “There is much to be said for doing nothing at all. Malfoy will reap the wages of his deeds and I doubt the next few weeks will be kind to him. How are things for him in Slytherin, Daphne?”

“Bad,” returned the slender girl. “Almost everyone has turned against him except his cohorts. Even Nott, the most neutral Slytherin, was furious with Malfoy – although he said nothing.”

“So apologising to us is going to cost him a lot of face?”

“Immense,” nodded Rosier. “That one thing could ruin his reputation badly.”

Harry nodded, "So – even our doing nothing will damage his reputation badly in the short term."

"Why do you say 'short term'?" asked Justin.

"Public memory is notoriously short, Justin," replied Harry wearily. "The moment Malfoy does something that pleases them, he will be back in favour with the House. And being the son of Lucius Malfoy – not to mention his own abilities – he has plenty of opportunity to do just that. Besides, Snape will help Malfoy impress Slytherin as well. I wouldn't be surprised if Snape gave Malfoy more points in Potions this week."

Rosier, Greengrass, Bones and Goldstein all nodded slowly at that. What Harry said made sense. Harry continued, "What will attacking him do? Will he lose any more respect from Slytherins?"

Daphne answered slowly, "I don't know. I don't think so. The people who are sticking close to him now are his old allies. Pansy has been friends with him for a long time. She won't leave him. Crabbe and Goyle are not functional without him. None of them are not going to leave him because we throw a few hexes at him. In fact, our being hostile may even do him some good. Slytherins don't like to see their House mates attacked by others. Some might even defend him just because it is other Houses attacking him."

Harry nodded grimly, "It is as I suspected. We really have nothing to gain by being cruel to him. Now my friends, what have we to gain by being kind to him?"

"Nothing," answered Millicent.

"Not quite, Millie," smiled Harry. "For one thing, we know how much he values face. Suppose we offer to let him off apologising to us this evening?"

The others stared at him with expressions from surprise to horror. "He wouldn't be grateful to you," said Daphne flatly.

“No, I don't expect he will. But, tell me, will he still view us as the main enemy? After all, even if we don't target Malfoy, others aren't going to stop doing it. The Gryffindors – specifically the Weasleys – loathe Draco too much. They will use this opportunity to attack him and earn his hatred more than us. I suggest that we sit back and let them fight it out. It might get him off our back for sometime – at least, until he is back in full favour with Slytherin.”

Harry continued, “But there is more. Malfoy has been able to make Daphne and Millicent's lives hard mainly because he has a lot of influence in Slytherin. His year mates obey him, the prefects dare not punish him, Snape supports him and so forth. Now, Malfoy's disgrace gives us a golden opportunity to undermine his influence there. It would make Daphne and Millie safer as well.”

“How do you propose to do that?” asked Millicent.

Harry smiled, “Malfoy apart, there are eight students in our year in Slytherin, and three of them – Parkinson, Goyle and Crabbe – are Malfoy followers. If Daphne and Millicent had another couple of allies in Slytherin, I would be happier about their safety.”

“And you propose to utilise Malfoy's disgrace to gather allies in Slytherin?” asked Goldstein, catching on to the game Harry was considering.

Harry nodded, “Nott, in particular. He has never been a Malfoy minion.” Harry leant back in his chair and spoke almost absently, “I have long been considering getting Nott on our side. Apart from his value in keeping Millicent and Daphne safe, he is the only one who has been nearly matching Sak in Astronomy, and has beaten all of us except Hermione at every test in History. We know from experience how good Sak and Hermione are at Astronomy and History, so Nott's abilities are not something to be sneezed at.”

Rosier and Granger blushed and waved it away, but Harry continued seriously. “Listen, people – when it comes to academics, our group has the top three spots in all the subjects except for a very select few. Only Padma Patil in Herbology and Potions, Nott in Astronomy and History and MacDougal in Defence have been in the top spots. I have

been thinking of inviting them to our weekly homework meetings. If that is acceptable to you all that is.”

There were slow nods, while Hermione questioned, “Why bother, Harry?”

“They have ideas that we don’t. It will be interesting to compare notes and their views.” Harry finally locked eyes with the muggleborn girl and his voice was stern and sombre, “Finally, in this school, we have all been attacked at least once over the last few months. First it was Malfoy and his goons attacking Millie and Daph, then it was the troll, then it was me getting poisoned and cursed. More friends to watch each others’ backs cannot hurt!”

“What makes you think they will be interested?”

“Well, our group has been at the top in almost every subject. They are ambitious enough and they want to succeed. They will accept the invitation to better grades, if nothing else!”

There was a moment’s silence. “All this is fine. But why does not burning our bridges with Malfoy matter?” asked Justin.

“It doesn’t. But in this case, we’ve got nothing to gain by being harsh with Malfoy. Think of this – let us say we force him to apologise to us tonight. Do you think he will really feel sorry? No. His words will have no meaning, and we will be seen as trying to humiliate him. In fact, I would not be surprised if there were rumours that we are forcing him to apologise to us. Therefore, we might as well try the kinder alternative. Also, if Malfoy decides to retaliate, he will likely choose his greatest enemies. Let him think of others as his greatest enemies!”

“Harry, I suggest that you extract a price from Malfoy for letting him off apologising to us. Even if it is a small one, and even if we know he is not going to pay it,” suggested Tony quietly.

“Why?” inquired Harry curiously.

“We don't want to hurt his pride, since we get no benefit out of it. Gifting him your pardon, so to speak, will look like condescension to him.”

Harry nodded. He recalled his old teacher in his elementary school mentioning a cynical bit of information about the Cardinal Mazarin in the course of one of his lessons. The Cardinal, his teacher had informed the class, was in the habit of putting down rebellions he had himself organised. The situation that applied to him was now similar. True – he had not meant to organise this revolt against Malfoy – but he was grateful for the opportunity, and was just in the situation as the arch-politician to reap the rewards of his campaign. He continued, “As a price for letting him off, what do you think of asking him to leave us alone in the future? That we'll stay out of his business as long as he stays out of ours?”

“I doubt he'll keep it,” answered Goldstein.

“I don't think he will either. And his keeping his word is really immaterial – he is too weak to do anything much by himself. We just want him distracted so that he does not focus on us. But he'll stick to it in the short run, because he's got other problems to deal with.”

“Okay,” concluded Harry. “Now about MacDougal, Patil and Nott – what shall we do? Shall we invite them to our weekly meetings? We can gauge their ideas and reactions before we proceed further.”

No objections were raised to this, so Harry continued, “How do we approach them?”

“I can talk to Nott, Harry,” answered Daphne.

“Tony and I will speak to Morag and Padma,” supplied Rosier.

“Good – let me know how it all goes,” replied Harry. With that decision from Harry, the group broke up. As the others began to leave, Harry pulled Sakarbal aside. “Sak, can you let Narcissa Malfoy know what really happened? And you can tell her what we are doing to clear up the mess. Tell her we'll try to defend Draco as much as possible!”

“Are you really planning to defend Malfoy?”

“I won’t let him get hexed in my presence if I can help it!”

Rosier offered a suggestion, “If we’re going to let him off apologising to us, I think we should discreetly let the other purebloods in Slytherin know that we did it because ‘we don’t want a member of an old wizarding family shamed’.”

Harry stared, “D’you think people will believe it?”

“It can’t do us any harm to try. It will win us a few brownie points if it succeeds,” replied the pureblood with a wry smile.

Harry nodded, and the duo parted on that note.

--(Scene Break)--

Harry, accompanied by Sakarbal, had gone straight to Malfoy and hailed him. “What’s it, Potter? Want to kick someone who’s down?”

“No, Malfoy. Listen to me for a minute. I am willing to ask Dumbledore to let you off apologising to us.”

This was something totally unexpected that Malfoy stopped short.  
“You said?”

“You heard what I said. I am willing to ask Dumbledore to let you off apologising to us.”

Draco was quick to catch on, Potter was willing to bargain with him,  
“What do you want in return?”

“Nothing more than your word of honour that you will leave us alone.”

“Why Potter? Afraid that your blood traitors and mudbloods will bite the dust? Or, after getting me in trouble last night, you ...”

“Give it a rest, Malfoy,” returned Harry wearily. “Just now for a moment, you looked almost reasonable, when you went off into that psychotic blather. Now – I am feeling generous and am willing to come with you and ask Dumbledore that you be let off from apologising to us. In return, you and your little friends will keep away from me and my friends. That way, we’ll all be happy.”

“I don’t need your charity!” snarled Malfoy.

“Oh very well, then – you can always humiliate yourself in front of the school if that’s what you want.” Harry had seen Malfoy flinch at that, and decided to twist the knife. He laughed unpleasantly, “I wonder what your Slytherin friends will say when they see you apologising to a half-blood in front of the school ...”

Malfoy stood clenching and unclenching his hands. Acknowledge the gift he would not, refuse it, he could not. He stood irresolute. A minute’s silence followed and Rosier and Potter stood indifferently, their eyes focussed on something outside the window. They seemed to be giving Malfoy himself not another thought. Finally, Malfoy broke the silence, “You got me in the mess last night. Why would you do it, Potter?”

Harry looked at him for a long time and finally answered, “Your mother did me a great favour. She helped me when no one else would.”

“Eh? What was that?”

“Ask your mother, Malfoy. She’ll tell you. In the meantime, do you want to do this or not?”

“How d’you know I’ll keep the terms?”

“If a Malfoy were to break his word, he would only shame himself and his family,” returned Harry coolly.

Malfoy was trapped and there was no way out of this corner without losing enormous prestige. Potter was extending him a virtual lifeline.

There was nothing else to be done. The terms Potter was proposing were not harsh – far from it actually. He gritted, “I accept your terms.”

“Good,” replied Harry nonchalantly. “Let’s go to Dumbledore and settle this right away,”

--(Scene Break)--

Dumbledore had objected to the course being proposed by Harry. “Mr. Malfoy made reckless accusations against you, Harry. He must apologise for his actions!”

“Malfoy made a mistake. As things stand, I hardly see how he has done me or my friends any harm. Nor do I see any reason for him to apologise to me publicly, especially since he never accused me publicly,” returned Harry stolidly. For this expedition to Dumbledore’s office, Harry had taken Hermione and Susan along with Malfoy. Rosier had been left behind – the Ravenclaw had pointed out that his presence could do no good, and it would be better if a half-blood and a muggleborn accompanied Harry on his clemency petition.

Dumbledore was inwardly furious. This had been such a splendid opportunity to sow more discord between Harry and Narcissa Malfoy and Harry was ruining it all for him. To force Draco to apologise now was dangerous – Harry might get up at the table and say what he had said just now to him. That would be disastrous. Besides, Malfoy knew that Harry truly did not desire an apology and had done everything to stop Dumbledore from forcing the Slytherin prince to apologise in public. Therefore, he had to accept the situation as it was. He acceded to Harry’s request and they departed.

Once they had departed, Dumbledore fell into a profound reflection. He had been trying to prevent Harry from becoming an independent entity. Harry’s actions gave him a sense of déjà vu. Fifty years ago, another half blood student had managed to gather the brightest and the best, the most talented and knowledgeable of the school to his standard. He had shown enormous talent, skill, resolution and ruthlessness in his career, even as he appeared a model student. Now, before his eyes was playing out another drama on similar lines. The finest of the first years were resolutely standing beside Harry

Potter willing to do much for the Boy-Who-Lived. But there was one curious difference – Tom would never have shown anyone mercy, if he got the chance. He would have utilised the opportunity to humiliate his enemies. Harry Potter had shown mercy, not because it was the kind or the correct thing to do, but because he saw more profit in mercy. That was frightening.

The headmaster had hoped that Harry would be an easily honed weapon, which could then be launched against Voldemort when he returned. Things would have been easier for Harry had he been the mindless pawn that he was meant to be. In fact, his chances of surviving the headmaster's attentions would have been far better, if he had shown real use to Dumbledore's schemes. But now, ..

--(Scene Break)--

Narcissa had accepted Sakarbal's explanation of the events, and had besought Harry and his group to protect Draco as much as possible. Harry had accepted that request and was doing as much as possible to stop Draco from being attacked by others. Even with Harry Potter and his friends remaining neutral, Draco was having a terrible time in school. The Slytherins had taken it on themselves to make Draco's life as painful as possible. The Gryffindors kept popping in and out, particularly led by the Weasleys, to make Draco's life even more difficult. Assaults against Draco – both verbal and physical abounded and Draco was, for the first time in his life, finding out what it was to be a victim of the displeasure of his peers. Draco was walking down a corridor, when the Weasley twins played a prank that tied his shoelaces together. Malfoy tripped and fell over, banging his knees painfully, while Ron, Dean and another Gryffindor guffawed at the prank. Percy, the Gryffindor prefect was looking disapproving at the antics of the twins. What he would have done became a matter of academic interest, as Harry, Rosier, Greengrass and Granger who were passing by stopped, and acted before he could. Rosier muttered a simple charm that undid the knot, while Harry called out to Fred and George, "Can you two stop tormenting Draco? It is bad enough what he is going through without you adding to his burden!"

Everyone looked flabbergasted at Harry, since defending Draco Malfoy was the last thing expected. "Harry?" muttered the twins in surprise.

Harry nodded, "Leave him alone. He's got enough to deal with." He sighed, "For my sake, you two – leave him alone!" Leaving everyone outside the group gaping in surprise, Harry and his friends walked past and Harry flung a Parthian shot at Ron and his friends, "It does your Gryffindor nobility little credit to kick someone who is down!" Turning to Draco, he remarked, "Are you alright?"

Draco had turned pale with anger and mortification. Without a word, he pulled himself to his feet and vanished down the corridor. Harry shrugged, turned away and with his friends, disappeared into the school. "That was a very noble thing you did, Harry," praised Hermione, her eyes shining with admiration.

Harry's lips quirked cynically, as he returned, "There are times when kindness is more useful."

--(Scene Break)--

Draco was working full time to reconcile himself with his House and in this endeavour, he had been assisted ably by Snape. The four weeks before Easter holidays felt like four years to Draco, but they passed at last, and many of the school members became more relaxed, finally procuring for Draco the much needed respite. Children were not, after all, capable of sustained vindictiveness and Draco was hoping that time would cool off their vengeance against him.

In the meantime, Harry Potter was working full time on his studies with his friends. Their collective efforts were sufficient to gain the group the top spots in almost all subjects, and the weekly meetings with Nott, Patil and MacDougal were proceeding fruitfully. In the meantime, Harry's lessons with Quirrell were also continuing, although the Defence professor seemed to be getting tider with each passing day. They had gone back to the one session per week, and in one of the sessions, Harry had observed that the man's fingernails had turned blue. Clearly, he was in the grip of some slow and debilitating disease or disorder.

During Easter, occurred the first incident of note. Millicent got a letter from her mother, after reading which, the muscular Slytherin girl went pale. "What's it, Millie?" inquired Harry, seeing the pallor of the girl.

"Those idiots want to round up and tag centaurs," snarled Millicent.

"Sorry, who wants to round up and tag centaurs?" Justin was confused.

"That bitch, Umbridge! She's got a law passed that requires centaurs to 'register' and get tagged by the Ministry!"

"Who the deuce is she?"

"A Ministry official who hates all non-humans," sighed Anthony. "She's very high up in the Magical Creatures department. And she's got the Minister's ear."

Daphne closed her eyes and spoke wearily, "She can get Fudge to sign off on anything she wants. Not that the Minister would need any encouragement to go after centaurs. He thinks they are all just wild beasts."

Susan added bitterly, "Umbridge made auntie's life miserable last year – asking her for aurors to go hunting werewolves that were minding their own business!"

"How come she's that high up if she's so bigoted?"

"Because she's so bigoted," answered Daphne caustically. "There are plenty of wizards, Harry, who believe that all non-humans are barbarians. They think all other beings should be controlled by humans. The very fact that this law was passed shows how many in the Wizengamot support it."

Harry filed away that information for future. He would research who had voted against the centaurs and would try to find out their agenda. "Okay – so what do we do?" asked Harry.

Millicent answered, "Well, mum's asked me to warn them of this. Hagrid'll know where to find them."

Harry rose to his feet, "No time like the present. Let's find Hagrid and warn the centaurs of this." He added almost as an afterthought, "Besides, I would like to meet the centaurs and find out for myself what they are like."

--(Scene Break)--

Hagrid had proved most cooperative when told of the mission the duo had come on. At first, he suggested that he take the message himself, but Millie declined that offer. She had been charged by her mother to do the job and she would do it herself. So, Hagrid agreed and the trio walked with Hagrid and his dog into the Forbidden Forest.

They first came across a red-haired centaur named Ronan. Millicent dropped a curtsy and called in Centaurian, "Greetings!" Harry and Hagrid both looked in astonishment at the heavy-set Slytherin girl who seemed to know a wide variety of languages.

"Who are you, youngling? And how come you speak my tongue?" returned the surprised Centaur.

Millicent returned haltingly in the same language, "I am Millicent Bulstrode, the daughter of Bianca Crouch-Bulstrode. I come bearing a message for the centaurs from my mother."

"Your command of my language leaves a lot to be desired, young one," remarked the centaur dryly in English. "What did you wish to speak to me about?"

"I bring a message from my mother, a friend of centaurs. The Ministry is trying to pass a law that would force all centaurs on public lands to register and be tagged." Despite her attempts to control her feelings, she had practically spat the last few words in disgust.

The centaur made an angry noise, but Millicent continued hurriedly, "My mother apologises for what is happening, but requests that all

under Ministry jurisdiction move to private lands as soon as possible to escape this madness."

Ronan looked at the trio for a long moment, and then drew a horn from his belt and sounded it in a strange pattern loudly. He, then, made a gesture to follow him. As they followed the centaur, Harry asked Millicent in an undertone what had transpired between her and the centaur a few minutes ago, and the girl translated their conversation for him. A few minutes of walk brought them to a clearing, and there were about fifty centaurs all gathered there, waiting in some puzzlement why the meeting had been called.

As Ronan came with the giant gamekeeper and the two students, he greeted everyone else and spoke for a few minutes with the one who appeared to be their head. The large centaur who was speaking to Ronan finally asked Millicent to speak her news to everyone. The Slytherin girl did, although it was plain that she was more than a little intimidated at the prospect of addressing a whole crowd of centaurs. When she had finished, there were angry shouts and threats, but Magorian commanded them to silence. He turned back to Millicent, "Tell your mother we are grateful for the warning. The centaurs will consult with the stars and decide what to do. Ronan will escort you back to the edge of the Forest."

As they all walked back, Harry spoke to Ronan, "Is there nothing we can do to help you?"

Ronan looked coldly at Harry, "We don't need your pity or charity."

Harry shook his head, "I'm not trying to offer you charity. What's happening is just wrong. No one should be humiliated like this."

Millicent added, "Certainly not an ancient race like the centaurs. The centaurs were a civilised race when humans were picking berries naked! And you know Crouches have always assisted centaurs."

Ronan remained silent, as Harry continued, "Please. We only wish to help. Is there anything we can do at all?"

Ronan finally sighed, "What is written in the stars will come to pass, Harry Potter. So – don't worry about us. We can take care of ourselves. In this forest, we are safe since the Ministry has no authority here. We can invite our brothers and sisters from outside to move in with us."

Almost as an afterthought, he added, "I appreciate your intention, though and we centaurs certainly owe some gratitude towards the family of Crouch." He gave Harry's face a long, intent and very serious look and spoke clearly, "Take care, Harry Potter. Mars is unusually bright, and it is the innocents who die first. The food of the gods is not for mortals, but when wizards aspire for that which should not be, it may yet be made of that which is hidden and yet not hidden. The dead who are not dead may return to life and the reign of Mars may begin once more. Beware!" The cryptic warning spoken, the centaur disappeared back into the woods.

Harry looked in bewilderment after the retreating centaur, but Millicent had drawn a small writing pad and was busy scribbling down everything the centaur had said just before disappearing. "What did he mean, Hagrid?" asked Harry.

"I dunno, Harry. Centaurs ne'er speak easy."

"He said something about innocents being the first to die. Has anyone been killed in the forest?"

Hagrid shook his head. "No one's been killed." But Harry detected a faint note of concern in the gamekeeper's voice. "So who's been hurt?"

"No, no. Summat killed a unicorn some days ago and another one yesterday. But that happens now and then. We should get back to the school."

--(Scene Break)--

"A unicorn has been found dead, you say?" Daphne had jumped to her feet, her eyes shining with concern and unhappiness. "I need to see it."

Harry looked in surprise at the girl's demeanour. "I don't know where it is. Hagrid said he .."

"In that case, Hagrid will know where it is. I need to see it immediately!"

Harry nodded in acquiescence – he understood Daphne's concern considering the significance of the unicorns to the Greengrasses – and accompanied Rosier, Bulstrode, and Greengrass to Hagrid's hut. Leaving Rosier to console his friend, Harry whispered to Millicent, "About the dead unicorn. What does Daphne plan to do?"

"I think she wants to see if she can identify what killed the unicorn. If so, she will inform the other unicorns on her estate of this threat. She will also, if she can, get her parents to inform other unicorns in the Forest of the threat, and may even try to persuade them to evacuate this Forest until the threat has been eliminated."

Millicent sighed wearily, before continuing, gesturing towards the Forbidden Forest, "This Forest once counted the largest number of unicorns in a single preserve in the world – there were over a couple of hundred. Today, there may be a couple of dozen unicorns – perhaps even less."

"But why?" queried a perplexed Harry. "Surely, no one's been hunting in the Forest?"

Millicent laughed sourly, "My mum reckons Hagrid's the reason. He's got a colony of acromantula – giant spiders – in this Forest. While the acromantula can't catch the adult unicorns which are very fast, they can and do catch and eat foals, and very old unicorns. Given that unicorns breed slowly, the loss of even a few foals leads to a general decline. Besides, when the acromantula moved in, the unicorns migrated away. Some of them were relocated to the Lestrange estate, others on the McKinnon-Vance estate and yet others moved to the preserve near St. Mungo. Of course, during the migrations, many perished from want of forage and physical exhaustion."

"Dumbledore allowed it?"

“Dumbledore needs Hagrid more than the unicorns, Harry. The only way to preserve the unicorns in the Forest would be to exterminate the acromantula – which are not creatures native to Britain. They were introduced here by Hagrid and they now are taking their toll on the endemic species. Exterminating the acromantula would antagonise Hagrid, so Dumbledore has taken the easier method of prohibiting everyone entrance into the Forest. No news – so no trouble. Problem solved!”

“How on earth do you know all this?”

“Through my mum. The Ministry conducts biannual surveys of all magical creatures in all preserves of Britain. A year ago, their surveys indicated that there were about thirty unicorns in this Forest and they were in severe decline.” Her lips twisted into a bitter smile, “The report, though, was never published. Dumbledore wouldn’t allow it.”

Harry was scowling on hearing how Dumbledore was allowing things to fall apart to please his proteges. The old coot was utterly indifferent to the effects on others – as long as it served his purposes, he was more than willing to pursue his own objectives with a frightening and single-minded recklessness and ruthlessness. Finally, he returned to earth, “You said that acromantula have never captured adult unicorns. How do you account for this dead unicorn?”

“I don’t know, Harry. I need to see. I’m sure that’s Daphne’s main concern as well.”

“Do humans hunt unicorns?”

Millicent was silent for a moment. Finally, she answered slowly, “It is possible. But only a nutcase or a truly desperate man would do such a thing. Unicorn body parts have a lot of uses, Harry, but to slay a unicorn is a monstrous thing. Even the most despicable of Dark Lords refrained from that particular atrocity. Slaying a unicorn brings a terrible curse on you because you have slain a truly pure creature for your gain. Unicorn blood will keep a man alive even if he is at the point of death, but from that moment, he is cursed.”

“So who would want to do something so stupid and dangerous?”

Millicent shrugged, “I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine. Ah – here we are! Let me see that unicorn's injuries” Millicent hurried forward with Daphne, leaving Harry and Sakarbal standing back from the two girls, watching them with rapt interest.

Daphne rose after a few minutes, her lips compressed and her eyes flashing with fury. Without a word, she stalked towards the school, leaving her friends staring in her wake, before they followed her. Daphne went straight to the owlery and sent off two letters,

Finally, they all returned to the others and swiftly explained everything that had happened. Harry's first concern was for Daphne, who was reclining sadly on a sofa. Rosier was sitting with her, his arm around her shoulders, when Harry questioned, “Daphne, is there something we can do to help you?”

The pureblood Slytherin shook her head slowly, “I don't think so. I've sent owls to mum and uncle Rabastan about the unicorns. Tomorrow, they'll be here and will try to persuade the other unicorns to leave the Forest.” She continued very softly, speaking almost to herself, “The question is where.”

“Sorry?” interrupted Harry.

Daphne sighed wearily, “Both Greengrass and Lestrange estates already have all the unicorns they can hold. And unicorns are not something you can feed in a manger – they are intensely territorial and they need their space. Those relocated in either of these two places will be very uncomfortable.”

“Is there no other place they can be moved to?” asked Harry. “How about your place, Sak?”

Rosier shook his head sadly, “Our estate is a thickly wooded, broken and swampy area. Unicorns need plains, grasslands and clearings.”

Susan Bones spoke thoughtfully, “I can speak to auntie and see if we can host a few unicorns on our estate. There are a few clearings there.”

“The best place, though,” went on Daphne thoughtfully, “is on the McKinnon-Vance estate. And they have space for more unicorns. But that is just wishful thinking.”

“Why?”

There was an uncomfortable silence at the question. Finally, Rosier answered succinctly, “Our relations with the McKinnons are badly strained, Harry. They wouldn’t do anything for us.”

Harry thought out loud, “What if I were to request them?”

A sharp intake of breath was heard at this. “You’d do this for us?” stammered Daphne.

“Why not? This is dear to your heart, and you are a friend. That is enough for me. So – if I send a letter of request to Emmeline McKinnon-Vance, would it help?”

“I guess so,” answered Daphne. Harry immediately complied with her request and sent a message to Lady Emmeline, requesting a few minutes of her time. He told her that it involved some unicorns in Hogwarts, and that he needed her help. Similarly, Susan Bones wrote to Amelia Bones asking for her help in relocating the unicorns. Daphne stuttered out her thanks – it was unlike the completely self-possessed girl in control of everything, but Harry waved them away. That done, they all settled back into a more lively conversation.

Harry finally asked a question, “Daph, Millie – care to tell us what you learnt from the dead unicorn?”

Daphne was still very deeply disturbed by what she had seen, so Millicent explained for her, “The unicorn was not killed by direct magic or by any predator. But that is not surprising – they are resistant to magic and are fast and stealthy. It was struck by an arrow or javelin or some such piercing weapon. But what was worrisome was that it

was drained of all blood. And the horn was taken. Curiously, the tail hair and hooves were left behind.”

“Someone was desperate enough to take unicorn blood,” murmured Harry. “But what use is the horn?”

Daphne pulled herself together to answer that question, “Unicorn blood and ground horn are combined together and used to make servo mortalitas – a very powerful healing and restorative potion that can keep you functional even if you are dying. It heals injuries instantaneously and can literally keep death away. However, it is also one of the foulest potions since it requires the slaughter of a unicorn and collection of the blood while it is yet alive!”

Harry frowned – he remembered Millicent telling him how valuable the tail hair was in wand making. He commented, “Millie – I think you said the tail hair is very valuable.”

The hefty Slytherin caught on to what Harry was thinking, “The blood is not so valuable – since it is too vile to be used. So whoever hunted the unicorn was not after money. They just wanted to make the potion!”

Harry nodded grimly, “There is more. Hagrid said that this is the second unicorn that has been killed. Assuming that the first one was also killed by the same person, who would require so much unicorn blood in such a short time?”

The implications of Harry's words sank in and there was a collective gasp of horror. Harry continued, “In fact, what has been happening coincides very well with the warning the centaur gave. Millie, would you like to read the warning?”

Everyone looked at him questioningly, so Harry explained the warning Ronan had given him and Millicent read the actual warning.

Finally, Rosier spoke, “That is very worrisome, Harry. Centaurs are diviners par excellence, and I would take that warning seriously.”

Hermione interrupted, "McGonagall says that Divination is a very imprecise science, Harry."

Susan answered, "Not quite. McGonagall is biased against Divination. There are more charlatans in Divination than in other branches of magic, it is true, but Divination itself is not remotely imprecise. We need to be able to understand and interpret correctly."

Rosier sighed, "Let's take the warning piece by piece. 'Mars is unusually bright' – Mars is the Roman god of war, and his being bright points to a chance of a war or violence. But it is 'unusually' bright – so does it also point to an unusual kind of war or violence? Or does it point to some kind of violence that has not been foreseen or is thought improbable?"

There were no answers to it, so he continued, "It is the innocent who die first'. This, I think, we can take to refer to the unicorns. There is nothing more innocent or pure than a unicorn." There were nods of agreement at his words, so he continued, "Now we come to the more difficult part, 'The food of the gods is not for mortals'. What is the food of the gods?"

"Nectar? Ambrosia?" supplied Goldstein thoughtfully.

"I have never heard of anyone making nectar or ambrosia," objected Daphne, "since that is what the next bit says."

They were getting nowhere with this. Harry sighed, "Very well, people. It's getting late tonight. We'll discuss this tomorrow and do some research on it."

On that note, they all rose and made their way back to their Houses. On the way back, Susan whispered to Harry, "It was noble of you to offer to help the unicorns. But you need to be careful."

"Of what?"

"You are the Boy-Who-Lived. Everything you do will have political overtones. You should be careful not to give people the wrong impression!"

Harry nodded grimly, "Thanks for the warning, Susan, I'll watch my step."

--(Author's Notes: )--

What would be the effect on Malfoy if he lost them a hundred points and put them at the bottom of the table in one go? Would the House that values success above everything pardon Malfoy? What about his friends? How many of them would hang on to him? How would the rest of the school react to a chance offered to put the Slytherin ponce in place? Also, this is the first chance I have had for Harry to play a bit of manipulation of his own. Let us see how well I can write Harry's manipulation, shall we?

Also a bit of explanation about Crouch's ability to speak so many different languages. I've never seen anyone assign a reason to that. Considering that the Wizarding World in general and the purebloods in particular are not particularly admiring of non-humans and/or their traditions, it would be interesting to explore why old Party could speak so many languages fluently.

Thanks to my Beta readers – Voice of the Nephilim and Abstract Error.

## The Roaring Snake – 25

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR. As usual, all criticism is welcome.

### Politicking

On the night when Harry and his friends were confabulating about the meaning of the warning they had received from the centaurs, Dumbledore was in a deep quandary as he read the letter Harry had written to Emmeline. The wily headmaster had long placed a post-redirection ward around Hogwarts, the Dursleys' residence and the Weasley household to ensure that he read any letter Harry might send via any owl. After all, he needed to be informed of what his pawn was thinking. Hogwarts was Dumbledore's backyard and little of any consequence occurred in the castle that he was not aware of. Having finished reading the letter, Dumbledore passed it without a word to Snape.

Snape glanced over the contents. "Well, headmaster?" questioned Snape in his quiet, hateful voice. "Are you going to take steps to restrain that foolish, arrogant brat?"

"What would you have me do, Severus?" sighed Dumbledore wearily.

"You surely cannot allow Emmeline Vance or any of the Lestranges to investigate the deaths of the unicorns?"

"No, Severus, I will not permit that," answered Dumbledore quietly. "Hogwarts is sovereign territory and they have no legal status here. But I cannot do anything to stop Harry from contacting them or the Lestranges from speaking to the unicorns."

"You have his letter. You could simply destroy it, and Vance will never know," returned the Potions master.

"Unfortunately, Severus, that is not an option. There are several ways in which Harry Potter could contact Emmeline. He could floo her office in St. Mungo, or he could even ask Minerva to contact her for

him. The last thing we need is Minerva digging into the unicorn business."

"So you are going to let the brat dictate to you? You're going to let that arrogant child get away with ignoring your authority?"

"Severus! I would glad if you didn't speak to me as you do to your first years! I can do nothing. He is perfectly free to contact anyone he wants over any problem."

"You're his guardian! You should keep that ignorant brat humble! And you let him get away .." Snape stopped, finally seeing the anger in the old man's eyes. He knew that it was dangerous to push Dumbledore beyond a point. Dumbledore waited until Severus had wilted and then sighed and answered, "Severus, I have considered every possible counter move. First, let us have a clear view of what Harry Potter is doing. Once we know that, we can begin to consider what can be done to stop him."

Snape nodded, and Dumbledore continued, "Before we go into what Harry Potter is doing, let me tell you a bit of history. Fifty years ago, another very talented boy, a halfblood and an orphan, was sorted into Slytherin. As a halfblood, an orphan and with no family connections to flaunt, he was mostly ignored by the pureblood supremacists, or treated with mild condescension or haughtiness by them. His academic achievements, and his brilliance with magic meant little to them. However, this boy was blessed with extraordinary talent, resolution, and determination and he soon found a way out of his trouble. He started a group that attracted talented people from all over the school to his standard. Of course, his own inclinations precluded muggleborns, but in his day, muggleborns were very few and far between, in fact. Among the talented students that flocked to his banner were the brightest and the best Hogwarts had to offer then. His brilliance matched their own, his thirst of knowledge was paralleled by theirs, and he gained as much knowledge from them as he dispensed to them. It was a group that offered profit to all, and he was the leader of the group because of his own force of personality and genius – the first among equals."

"But, headmaster, what has all this ..."

Dumbledore interrupted him, “When I tell you that among the ones who flocked around this halfblood orphan were Adonibal Rosier, the great astronomer, Andronicus Nott, the matchless diviner, Jovianus McGonagall, the transfiguration genius, Justus Mulciber, the mind arts master, Antonin Dolohov, a Dark Arts specialist, and Lucullus Lestrange, probably the best healer of the day, you will admit that the history is of some significance.”

“The earliest Death Eaters!” muttered Snape. “The Dark Lord ...but I thought that the purebloods ...”

Dumbledore almost chuckled, “Severus, almost everyone thinks so now. But please do ponder over it. What did a poor, halfblood, orphan have to entice families as proud as the Malfoys, the Blacks, the Parkinsons, or the Yaxleys? He was mostly beneath their notice when he was here at Hogwarts – only Avery joined Tom, and I suspect it was because Avery had need of the group's skills to get good grades. The purebloods joined him when he re-surfaced as Lord Voldemort – or more accurately, he joined them, took over their efforts and redirected them to his own ends. But his first supporters were his peers – those who could relate to him on the level of his knowledge and magic.”

“But I never heard of this among the Death Eaters, sir?”

“You would not have heard of it. By the time you joined, most of the original followers of Tom were already dead – some by his own hand. Of the others, Nott simply kept his head down and hoped Tom's wrath would not descend upon him. Dolohov would hardly care to publish that his master's origins.”

“But what has this got to do with Harry Potter?”

In reply, Dumbledore took out a list from a drawer of his table. “This list, Severus, shows us the grades the students have obtained. This year is an unusual one – many of the students are actually showing far superior skills to the average first years, and the toppers of this year may well be on their way to becoming better wizards and witches than has been seen for quite a long time.”

Snape sneered, "If you say so, headmaster. They are the same useless, annoying, harebrained brats as usual."

Dumbledore seemed unfazed, "The scores here show some of the highest for first years in a generation. In Astronomy, we have Mr. Rosier, Mr. Nott and Ms. Granger scoring nearly a third higher than the average toppers in first year; in Defence we have Mr. Potter, Ms. MacDougal, Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Bones consistently exhibiting skills that are rated by Quirinius as well-beyond many second-year abilities. In Potions, you have observed how good Ms. Greengrass, Ms. Patil and Ms. Granger are." Snape did not challenge the last statement of Dumbledore's as the old man continued, "I will not bore you with all the names and grades, but suffice to say, the group surrounding Harry Potter is as capable and talented as the one which ringed Tom during his rise."

"Whatever be his friends, surely you don't suppose that that foolish, arrogant brat ..."

"I wonder why you insist on confusing Harry Potter with James. Severus, do not underestimate Harry Potter! The way he got Mr. Malfoy into trouble and then resolved it himself was pure genius!"

"What do you mean 'he got Malfoy into trouble'?" interrupted Snape.

"Ah – I see you have not figured it out." Dumbledore went on to explain what Harry Potter had done and how he had trapped Malfoy in his own game. He finished, "You see, Severus, it was quite the touch of genius to forgive Malfoy after getting him in trouble himself. As an added bonus, by forgiving Malfoy and appearing high-minded and above such petty spite, apart from discreetly letting the purebloods know that he was not looking to humiliate them, he has gained a lot of prestige in the eyes of those same purebloods."

Snape was fuming silently, imagining how he would punish Harry Potter for the transgression. That Potter should have the gall to frame his own godson was beyond tolerance. Dumbledore could almost read Snape's thoughts, so he returned sharply, "Don't do anything foolish, Severus! If you do anything overt and rash against Potter, you

will only end up in trouble yourself. Harry Potter is playing his game to a definite plan, and we need to deal with him carefully.”

“And what is his plan?”

“We know he is gathering the best of the first years to his banner. What he plans to do with them is unknown – I doubt he even knows himself anyway. But it is very clear that he plans to increase his influence among the student body. Therefore, we must nip it in the bud. Harry Potter cannot be allowed to become any more popular.”

Snape nodded vigorously at the statement. Nothing pleased the greasy haired potions master more than making a Potter unpopular. Dumbledore continued, “The most important thing to recognise is that Harry Potter has his own timetable for his events and we don't know where we are intervening on it. However, there are two things that are going to force Harry Potter's hand and force him to show it.”

“And what are they, headmaster?”

“The first is this centaur and unicorn business. I am interested in seeing what Harry Potter's feelings towards magical beings and creatures are. Which is one reason why I am not keen on stopping him from contacting Emmeline. It will be of some significance to observe whether he can manage to convince Emmeline to overcome her distaste for the Lestranges and help the unicorns. I also want to know more about his feelings for the centaurs. Ms. Bulstrode has been shaping his views regarding the magical beings, and I wish to observe whether it leads him. Will he dare openly oppose the Minister's view?”

“And what is the second?”

“The second is Quirinius. We both know that his time on earth is limited. He is going to move for the Stone soon. We must ensure that Harry Potter is on hand and they meet, and we must know what he feels towards Voldemort and his supporters. Once that is known, we will be in a position to better channel our efforts to contain Harry Potter.”

“What if the Dark Lord kills Potter?” Snape spoke, not with worry, but with a faint hope in fact.

“Severus, believe me – there is nothing that Quirinius or his master can do to permanently damage Harry Potter. Besides, I will be around to ensure that Harry is not killed.”

“Very well, headmaster,” returned Snape, disappointed that Harry was not going to be harmed yet. “What should we do now?”

“The first thing is to contain Harry's influence among the first years. But we cannot be seen to be intervening too directly. That would be counterproductive. Children take badly towards favouritism. If anything, we should be showing favour towards Harry, making him a teacher's pet and consequently one to be despised. In the meantime, there are two possible groups of first years who can be organised against Harry's efforts.”

Snape looked on expectantly, as Dumbledore continued, “The first group is Malfoy and his friends. Malfoy now loathes Harry Potter. You need to explain to him exactly what was done by Potter and make sure that he views Potter as his most serious opponent. While Draco was disgraced by Harry, he is still influential in Slytherin, and I am counting on you to help him out of the mess Potter got him into. But do not be obvious about it. Once Harry makes a mistake, he can be counted on to organise any opposition to Harry Potter from Slytherin.”

“And who are the second group, headmaster?”

“Leave that group to me, Severus. I will organise them. There are many Light wizards, who regard Harry Potter's friendship with Slytherins and Dark wizards as betrayal. They can be counted on to oppose Harry Potter and his allies.”

Snape nodded, understanding what the wily old man was planning. He would quietly manipulate his own loyalists among the students into opposing Harry Potter, while maintaining the facade among the adults that Harry and Dumbledore were in perfect consonance with each other. The animosity between Harry Potter and Dumbledore loyalists would be passed off as just jealousy, or misunderstanding.

However, he had another concern, “What about Minerva? She might intervene once more.”

“Leave Minerva to me,” replied Dumbledore grimly. “I will make sure she cannot intervene!”

“Why do we need to go through all this trouble? Why don’t we just kill that brat and be done with that?”

“Severus, Harry Potter must live. I have my reasons! Let that suffice for now.”

Snape sat silent for a moment before returning to the topic of Emmeline Vance and the danger she posed. Dumbledore acknowledged, “Yes, Severus, even with the modified memory, she will make Harry Potter and probably even Minerva suspicious. However, they can establish nothing. You can leave me to take care of that.”

Snape rose to his feet, and Dumbledore cautioned him, “Above all things, Severus, make sure that you do not get caught by Harry or his friends. The consequences for you might be really severe if they find out what you are doing.”

The Potions master nodded and the duo parted. As much as Dumbledore had put on a brave face with Snape, he was distressed underneath. Dumbledore had highlighted on Harry’s similarities with Voldemort, but he had hidden the differences. For one – Harry Potter was loyal to his friends. That could no longer be doubted considering how much trouble he was going through to help the Greengrass girl with the unicorn. For another, the Boy-Who-Lived was one looking for peaceable solutions. This was both a strength and a weakness. It could be used against him. However, a sigh escaped the old headmaster’s lips – Harry Potter was forcing him to play his better cards too soon. This situation could not endure. If the boy did not desist in his attempts to break away from Dumbledore’s influence, the headmaster would have to take some sterner measures. He frowned – perhaps one such situation could be arranged courtesy Quirrell.

A small chuckle escaped Dumbledore's wizened lips – by pointing out similarities between Voldemort and Harry, the headmaster had given Severus more incentive than ever to stop Harry becoming anything more than a broken student. Snape, for all his 'redemption', still respected nay, admired – Voldemort. The thought of Harry Potter with the undeserved aura of the Boy-Who-Lived was bad enough for Severus, but Harry Potter going on to become another Dark Lord? Blasphemy! Severus would eat his own liver out before he allowed Harry to gain even more glory, as Severus saw it. Snape could certainly be depended upon to stop Harry with every means at his disposal.

--(Scene Break)--

While Snape and Dumbledore were plotting against Harry Potter, Voldemort was in a towering fury. He had been researching a method to get past the cerberus of Hagrid for quite some time now and he had been unsuccessful. The cerberi were very powerful magical creatures, and very few spells were going to penetrate their thick hides. Direct attack spells were blocked out by the magic resistance – even killing curses cast by a single wizard, no matter how powerful, could not pierce the magic shielding, and indirect attack spells like conjured weapons were unlikely to more than injure them. Cerberi were immune to all poisons and vapours and they were not deceived by invisibility or disillusionment of any sort. Conjured explosives might do the trick of killing the beast, but so much explosive was required that Voldemort was worried that it would bring down the entire wing of the school along the accursed beast.

Voldemort's fury was having a deleterious effect on Quirinius Quirrell. Not only had his poor body to sustain two souls – a very draining process, and invariably fatal after a short while – but also had to cater to the feelings of two minds and this gave Quirrell a blistering headache. The pain and the weakness allowed a moment where his own true self emerged from the shadows of the Dark Lord's powers. Not for the first time did he wonder how he had ended up hosting Voldemort in his own body. He had tried to remember, in those infrequent moments, when Voldemort was engrossed in something else, and his own personality rose to the fore, but for the life of him, he could not remember how he had agreed to become Voldemort's

host. He supposed that the Dark Lord had played some trick that had brought him to this pitiable pass. And there was no way out of the mess he found himself in. Oh well – it didn't really matter – not anymore. Any moment, the Dark Lord would return and he would be Voldemort's faithful follower once more. And his time on earth was fast coming to an end even with the servo mortalitas.

Voldemort was, at the moment, engrossed in more important work and he had forgotten all about Quirrell. With a bitter snarl, he flung away the last volume he had in his hand – or rather, Quirrell's hand – and retreated back to Quirrell's body. Voldemort considered what he had researched – he had discovered two methods of getting past the cerberus and both of them were well beyond the abilities of Quirinius Quirrell, even with himself guiding the young professor. One method mentioned was so outlandish that Voldemort doubted that there were more than a handful of people in Britain capable of it. The second was a potion – the Shade of Psyche – that knocked out the accursed dog (1). This was a seemingly good way and administering it to the three headed dog was no problem at all. If the worst came to the worst, he could imperious a mudblood, fill the student up with the potion and send the fool to be sacrificed to the dog. The problem was that it was an immensely complicated potion, guaranteed to challenge a potions master's abilities and it took nearly six months to brew. Voldemort did not have that kind of time left. Even with the servo mortalitas – the potion he had brewed from unicorn horn and blood – Quirrell was sinking steadily, and Voldemort estimated that he had at most three months before succumbing. Voldemort had to act and fast, and there seemed to be no way to steal the Stone before Quirrell's demise left him mere vapour and shadow once more. He needed to discover a way fast.

--(Scene Break)--

The next day, Lord Rabastan Lestrange, and his sister, Lady Priscilla, along with Lord Hamalcar Rosier and Lady Wilkes, had arrived at Hogwarts and went directly into a serious meeting with the headmaster. Dumbledore was nothing if not unfailingly polite to everyone, including his opponents, and had pressed refreshments on his visitors, and sought the reasons for the meeting. Rabastan opened with a mention of the dead unicorns, pointed out how serious

it was and asked the headmaster about what investigations, if any, had been completed. Dumbledore smiled benevolently, "It is a most serious matter, but there is no reason to be greatly concerned. We have the situation well in hand now."

"Have you caught the culprits Albus?" demanded Andromache Wilkes imperiously.

"I am not sure there are any culprits to catch, Andromache. The first unicorn had no marks of weapons or magic used against it. I am inclined to believe it succumbed to a magical disease." Dumbledore's statement was true enough in letter – there was no weapons used against the unicorn. It had been trapped in a net and drained of all its blood.

"Albus, unicorns are extremely resistant to all kinds of disease," objected Rabastan wearily.

"But not immune," rejoined Dumbledore. "And in the second case, we know that the injuries were caused by piercing weapons, Andromache. That does not point to magic being used to kill the unicorn."

"Are you suggesting that muggles killed the unicorn, headmaster?" questioned Hamalcar, his tone implying how unlikely he thought the headmaster's theory.

"Of course not, Hamalcar. Muggles could never get into the forest. But we have other beings in the Forest who use piercing weapons."

Priscilla scoffed at the headmaster's theory, "The only beings in the Forest who use bows and arrows are the centaurs. They are expert marksmen and they would never harm unicorns."

"I do not suggest that they deliberately hurt the unicorn. If by mischance they ended up wounding a unicorn, others would have taken advantage of the unicorn's injuries."

"What 'others' do you refer to?" questioned Priscilla.

“Unicorn body parts are in great demand, Priscilla. Anyone from Hogsmeade might have taken advantage of the unicorns injuries?”

“And left behind all the tail hair and the hooves, which are the most valuable?” sneered Rabastan.

“It is most likely that the culprit was frightened off before he could complete his work.”

“And what have you done to ensure the safety of the unicorns?” queried Priscilla.

“I have instructed Hagrid to hire security trolls and put them around the Forest. That should suffice to dissuade most would-be looters of corpses.”

Rabastan stood up in disgust, “Dumbledore, you know how outrageous your theory is. Unicorns, in their prime, don't fall prey to diseases. Centaurs don't wound unicorns by accident. And if they did, they would nurse it back to health. I demand a full investigation into the incidents.”

“I am afraid there is nothing to investigate, Rabastan. As headmaster of Hogwarts, that is my final word.”

“Very well, you leave me with no choice but to speak to the unicorns themselves,” snapped back Rabastan.

“Hamalcar and Andromache have assured us in their capacity as school governors that we can speak to the unicorns in the Forest,” broke in Priscilla acidly, cutting off any objection that the old man might make.

“But do you really want to do this, Priscilla?” inquired Dumbledore, feigning sorrow. “Think of the damage you would do the reputation of Hogwarts. People might believe this place unsafe and we might lose students!”

Andromache spoke in a voice of utter disdain and ruthlessness, “The reputation of Hogwarts will not be enhanced by sweeping problems

under the carpet, Albus! Our only concern is the well-being of the unicorns under your stewardship – a duty you are clearly unwilling to do or incapable of taking seriously. We have the honour to wish you a very good morning!"

Dumbledore fumed at the insult as the four marched out of his office. He sighed – there was no way he could keep this business under wraps now. Once more, Harry Potter had indirectly contributed to his problems by befriending Daphne Greengrass and Sakarbal Rosier. The problem was that the headmaster's plan for Harry Potter did not have a lot of flexibility. The information about the unicorns had been meant for Harry Potter, and because he was friends with the Greengrass girl, the news had been spread around. The Daily Prophet would get hold of this bit of information and then the fat would be in the fire. It could not do him any great harm, but nevertheless, it was an unpleasant situation.

Dumbledore sighed. It was a bad week altogether. First the Ministry had brought out a mad law against the centaurs, and now this ... Suddenly, Dumbledore frowned as an idea struck him – perhaps he could yet turn the situation to his advantage. He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fire and called, "Elphias Doge!"

--(Scene Break)--

Lady Emmeline McKinnon-Vance was puzzled by the request from the Boy-Who-Lived, but she had graciously offered to meet with him over the floo network. Harry had Millicent with him for the meeting, and as soon as the stately witch appeared on the floo network, they greeted her with grave courtesy. Millicent had been coached by her mother in courtly manners and she and Harry spoke to Lady Emmeline of the problem of the dead unicorns and the need to evacuate them. Emmeline agreed with them about the seriousness of the situation and sighed, "Harry, what does Dumbledore think?"

"I do not know, ma'am," returned Harry honestly. "All I know is that the culprit has not been caught, and that there is no reason to believe that the danger has passed."

Emmeline spoke gently, “The unicorns are at Hogwarts for a reason, Harry. Advanced Care of Magical Creatures students study them, and if they are removed, Hogwarts students will be inconvenienced. Secondly, the unicorns in the Forest are an inherent part of the ecosystem, and the Forest will be the poorer for having lost some of her best denizens.”

Harry was silent, but Millicent butted in at the moment, “Ma'am, all you have said is true. But consider the alternative. We should not be asking your aid in such an energetic course, were the peril not desperate enough. If there is a real threat – and from the deaths and exsanguination of the unicorns, I would say there is a real one – the unicorns may be harmed worse by inaction. There are less than two dozen unicorns in the Forest ..”

“Excuse me!” Emmeline Vance seemed thrown off by the assertion.

“Oh yes, ma'am. There are less than two dozen unicorns, including foals and the older ones. The removal of another five adult unicorns will leave the Hogwarts population unviable.”

“You must be mistaken,” insisted Lady Emmeline. “The last time I heard there were around a hundred unicorns. While some have migrated away in recent years, I cannot believe that the population has fallen so precipitously!”

“It is true, nevertheless,” insisted Millicent.

Harry cut in, “Ma'am, can we afford to take chances? And consider what is already happening. The Lestranges know of the problem and they have already decided to move the unicorns away. The only question is where. You know as well as I do that the Lestrange and Greengrass estates cannot house more unicorns without grievous discomfort to the unicorns. Since the unicorns are going to be moved away, I was hoping you would find it in your heart to offer them a home on your estate where, I am told, there is space for more unicorns.”

“How did the Lestranges discover?” demanded Emmeline.

“I told Daphne Greengrass about the unicorns, and she got her parents and uncle to act.”

“Harry, do you realise how much damage you may have done to Hogwarts reputation? The Lestranges will utilise this situation to malign Professor Dumbledore.”

“Madam, I give you my word of honour that my only concern was for the unicorns when I spoke to Daphne. After that, it was out of my hands. Regardless of my actions, would it not be better if you were to help unicorns which are, in any event, going to be moved away. The Lestranges have seen to that. Mme. Bones has also agreed to help in this matter.”

It was easy to see that Emmeline did not relish the job she had on hand. However, her hands were tied. The unicorns were the priority and if they were going to be relocated in any event, the best thing she could do would be to make sure there were as comfortable as the circumstances permitted. She sighed, “Very well, Harry. I will do what I can.”

“Thank you, ma'am, and Daphne has empowered me to offer you the sincere gratitude of the Lestrange and Greengrass families. There was another bit of information we would be grateful for ma'am.”

“And what is it, Harry?” asked Emmeline, now genuinely curious.

“When I was at St. Mungo, you warned me about my dark friends', ma'am. I have been cudgelling my mind since then, and I fear it escapes me who you referred to.”

Emmeline frowned thoughtfully, “Dear me! I cannot remember at all! I seem to have forgotten who I spoke of. It is very strange. I shall make an effort to recollect who I referred to, Harry.”

“I'd be most grateful, ma'am. And thank you once more.”

With that, they separated.

--(Scene Break)--

The next day bought news of a different kind. Harry and his friends were, as usual, having their breakfast in an unused classroom. Harry opened his copy of the Daily Prophet and his attention was riveted on an article that focussed on the centaur bill. This occurrence would go a long way in shaping Harry's own outlook, and taught him a grim lesson in the utilisation of information and how, properly used, words could be deadly weapons .

### Centaur Bill clears High Council

Yesterday, the Centaur Registration Bill was cleared by the High Council on a margin of 104 votes for and 49 votes against, with 47 abstentions. Having been approved by the Wizengamot last week, it only required the approval of the High Council and that was obtained today, much to the delight of the Ministry. The margin of victory was a surprise, since it was expected to be a very close vote, with many members expressing their reservations about the proposed bill. However, a note circulated among the High Council members blaming the recent deaths of unicorns at Hogwarts on the centaurs may have played a large role in the Ministry's handsome victory. The contents have been verified, and our sources indicate that Lord Lestrange, the representative of the unicorns, had indeed gone to Hogwarts, expressing his concerns about the security of the unicorns and pointing out that a unicorn had been recently slain by an arrow of the type used by centaurs. Lord Rabastan Lestrange and his sister, Lady Priscilla, who are involved in translocating the unicorns to a safer place, were unavailable for comment, but informed sources claimed that they foresee a serious threat to the unicorns in Hogwarts and consequently, are taking steps to preserve them. The centaurs may well have doomed themselves by their actions.

Lady Augusta Longbottom, one of the staunchest opponents of the bill, surprised everyone by adopting a posture of neutrality regarding the centaur bill, while some others expressed shock and dismay at the actions of the centaurs. Speaking for the Ministry, Mme. Umbridge claimed that it was a victory against lawless behaviour of the centaurs, and promised to crush the rebellious centaurs who were harming the noblest creatures of the Light.

On the other hand, stubborn opponents of the bill like Lord Bartemius Crouch and Lady Amelia Bones refused to comment on the outcome, while Lady McKinnon-Vance called it 'an absolute shame', while scoffing at the idea that centaurs might have killed unicorns. She harshly condemned the note tying the centaurs to the deaths of the unicorns, claiming that the authors of the note were morally responsible for the passage of the reprehensible law.

Harry was gaping in horror at what he had read. He turned to Daphne, "Daph, did your parents blame the centaurs for the unicorns?"

"No, of course not!" returned the surprised girl. Harry pointed to the article with his egg spoon, and she quickly read it. "What utter rubbish!" snarled Daphne, slamming back the paper in disgust. "I never read such stupidity in my life! Besides, Harry, I know for certain that both my parents and uncle Rabastan voted against the bill!"

Harry nodded. Although the article had implied that the Lestranges were behind the circulation of the note, there was no reason to disbelieve Daphne and her reaction to the article had been one of authentic disgust. "Daph, have your parents started relocating the unicorns?"

The Slytherin girl gave a negative sign, so Harry continued, "So who knew?"

"Many people might have known, Harry," answered Daphne wearily. "To move the unicorns out of Hogwarts, my uncle had to file an application with the Ministry detailing the circumstances."

"But who tied them to the centaurs? Who circulated that 'note'?"

"Anyone at the Ministry might have taken the chance to ruin the centaurs," answered Rosier.

"So, Emmeline Vance was right? The centaurs were done in by that note?"

"Not quite, Harry," explained Susan. "The law had already cleared the Wizengamot. The High Council has no powers to reject a law made

by the Wizengamot. They can only send it back once with suggested changes and non-binding recommendations. The law would, at best, have been delayed."

"So, what purpose was served by the note?"

Susan grimly answered, "Someone in the Ministry decided to embellish what Lord Rabastan wrote in the application, and make the centaurs look bad."

"There is another possibility," murmured Anthony. "The passage of the bill was a foregone certainty, Harry. Someone would rather that the promulgation of the law be blamed on the Lestranges!"

There was a long shocked silence at this. Harry asked, "Should we do anything at all?"

"There is nothing much we can do," returned Millicent.

They agreed about this, and then Hermione interrupted excitedly, "I have been researching the prophecy of the centaurs. I've got a couple of clues"

"Go on, Hermione."

"I focussed on 'that which is hidden and yet not hidden' part of the prophecy. What do we know is hidden in the school?"

"Of course," breathed Anthony. "That stuff of Nicholas Flamel. We never got round to worrying about it."

Hermione nodded, her eyes shining with excitement, "Last night, I looked up the encyclopedia and he is, among other things, famous for making the Philosopher's Stone."

Daphne whispered in awe, "That answers it. The Elixir of life. It comes from the Philosopher's Stone! It makes people nearly immortal, so we can think of it as the 'food of the Gods'.

"Exactly," beamed Hermione.

Daphne went on with almost feverish excitement, "It even answers to the bit about 'that which should not be made'"

"How so?" questioned Harry.

"Harry, did you never wonder why there is only one Philosopher's Stone?"

"I assumed because it is difficult to make and no one apart from Flamel knows the secrets."

"Only partly true," replied Daphne. "Even if he was the only one to know the secrets, he could have made and sold them. People would pay enormous amounts to get hold of a Stone, after all. No, the making of the Philosopher's Stone is an utterly evil and brutal process. No Light or even Grey wizard would make it. Flamel made one as a proof of concept, but he has refrained from making more precisely because it is an unspeakably evil process."

"Why would Dark Wizards not make them?" demanded Hermione.

"It is a very slow and tedious process, and Dark wizards have other, easier methods of extending their lives, and getting gold," returned the slender Slytherin girl.

"What about the 'hidden and yet not hidden'?" demanded Millicent.

Rosier answered, "We know roughly where the Stone is hidden – behind the trapdoor on the third floor. So even if it is hidden, it is not really hidden – since we know where it must be!"

Harry nodded grimly, "So we have solved part of the prophecy. What about the 'dead who are not dead'?"

Hermione replied tentatively, "Well, whoever has been drinking all that servo mortalitas is for all practical purposes, dead – or should have been dead. But if they got hold of the Stone, they might prolong their lives indefinitely!"

"That is an excellent theory, Hermione," smiled Harry, giving the muggleborn girl and admiring smile, who blushed furiously.

"You think the person who killed the unicorn is inside Hogwarts," asked Justin incredulously.

"I don't see where else they could be," replied Harry seriously. "I don't think anyone in this part of the world, outside Hogwarts is even capable of catching and killing unicorns!"

"So what do we do?" asked Tony.

"I will have a chat with McGonagall about this. And then we will decide!"

--(Author's Notes)--

I have always wondered about the earliest Death Eaters. We know from canon that Riddle's earliest friends went on to become the first Death Eaters. I have been wondering about the agenda of the first Death Eaters. Especially when he was in school, it is most unlikely that the pureblood supremacists would have followed Tom Riddle, since there was nothing impressive about him to them. He is a half blood and no matter his talents, purebloods supremacists are not really impressed by magical abilities. I don't for one moment believe the theory that he was able to intimidate them into following him – purebloods would not take kindly to bullying by a half blood orphan. I have an alternate theory who the first Death Eaters were and what their agenda. Another point just as interesting is that we don't have many people who originally accompanied Riddle in his earlier days still standing at his side after he became the Dark Lord. Where are the original Lestrange, Rosier, Avery, Mulciber, et. al. (friends of Riddle, and the first Death Eaters if Dumbledore is to be believed)? What happened to them? Even more curious is the absence of Blacks, Malfoys, Parkinsons, etc. in Riddle's original club (at least, we have no proof of their presence). I have tried to develop that in the chapter.

The second bit of concern was the way Quirrell getting possessed by Voldemort being passed off as an accident even in fanon. From

canon, we know Quirrell was not a Death Eater. So how come he went to exactly the place where Voldemort was to get possessed? We know Voldemort avoided all populated areas, certainly areas where he knew wizards were around. Was Quirrell getting possessed really an accident? I am not at all so sure. It takes one heck of a coincidence to imagine that. Besides, how did a full grown adult wizard, who was no follower of Voldemort, and presumably no sympathiser of his either, get possessed in such a short time? I have an alternate theory about this and I will be developing that in the story.

And, of course, the cerberus is made a bit more useful. All you have to do is whistle in front of it and it drops off to sleep? Nah – I think not! The cerberus should get a bit more respect!

A big thanks as usual to my two beta readers - Voice of the Nephilim and Abstract Error. Thanks you two - you are just excellent.

(1) Shade of Psyche. Got the inspiration from Roman myth. Psyche drugged Cerberus with honeycakes on her way to meet with Pluto and Persephone in the story of Cupid and Psyche. Psyche was one of the very few who bested Cerberus, the others being Orpheus and Herakles.

## The Roaring Snake – 26

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR. As usual, all criticism is welcome

### Confrontations

For all his resolution not to waste time in speaking to McGonagall, Harry wanted to make sure of a few things before he went to the elderly transfiguration teacher. He spoke to Susan and Millicent and had them ascertain certain things. Once he had his information, he cornered McGonagall after the next transfiguration class about the Philosopher's stone. Deciding to act on his hunches as if they were certainties, he asked her, "Ma'am, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, Harry," returned McGonagall.

"Why is the Philosopher's Stone being kept behind that trapdoor in the third floor on the East wing?"

Whatever it was that McGonagall expected, it was not that. She gaped in astonishment at Harry Potter for a long moment and then spluttered, "How do you know?"

"Clues to it have been lying all over the place – the Cerberus, the Gringotts robbery, the references to Flamel – it wasn't hard to put them all together. But you didn't answer my question, Professor."

She sighed, "I cannot answer your question, Harry. Let me just say that it is by the headmaster's desire that the Stone is being guarded here. Why do you ask?"

"Someone is after the Stone," returned Harry grimly.

"Impossible! The Stone is too well protected. All teachers have helped, and Prof. Dumbledore himself has put together those protections to guard the Stone. So, don't worry."

"Professor, please! If we – mere first year students – can find out about the Stone and its defences, do you really imagine that anyone

wanting to steal the Stone would be ignorant of them? Besides, you can hear what we know before you decide that there is no threat to the Stone."

Minerva flushed under Harry's hit, before returning, "But why does it concern you?"

Harry briefly told her of the prophecy given by the centaurs, the deaths of the unicorns and how he and his friends had figured out that someone would make an attempt on it.

"But what makes you think someone's going after the Stone?" McGonagall was looking more and more skeptical. She set little store in Divination, centaur or otherwise, and deductions based on prophecies did not carry much weight with her.

"Professor, someone was desperate enough to brew servo mortalitas – the potion that unicorn blood is used most prominently in. Whoever drank that potion is cursed now. Do you really imagine that he will be content with the half life he has now? The only way to restore himself would be via the Elixir of Life."

"But who ..."

"I don't know. But whoever did it is here in Hogwarts."

Minerva had gone ashy pale. "Why would you say that?"

"Professor, whoever killed the unicorns has to be nearby – Millie tells me that unicorns are very secretive creatures and tracking one is no easy task even for an experienced hunter. Their habits have to be observed, their paths noticed and they have to be trapped using every ounce of caution that can be mustered. All this requires time patience, and proximity to the unicorns. Whoever did it needed a base to operate from. There are only two places close enough – Hogwarts, and Hogsmeade. You agree?"

Minerva nodded, and Harry continued, "Susan looked up the current permanent residents of Hogsmeade in the Registry the Ministry maintains; there are no magical beast trappers or hunters currently

known to be there. If it was someone who had come here recently, the person would have been remarked. Again, the local constable has reported that there are no new residents in Hogsmeade. Besides, it is a fairly small village and any newcomers would have been noticed and talked about. So, we can assume that the hunters are not operating from Hogsmeade. That leaves only one place – Hogwarts.”

There was a long awkward silence. Minerva did not want to credit that creatures desperate enough to hunt unicorns were in Hogwarts, but what Harry claimed hung coherently. She looked up with decision at the boy, “Thanks for bringing it to my attention, Harry. I will speak to the headmaster about this.”

“Thank you, ma'am. By all means, you may make use of the information I have given you. But I would be obliged if you don't mention my role at all.”

Minerva looked in surprise, and Harry answered her look, “It'd be safer for me if people don't know I am involved in this business.” Minerva nodded grimly, and they separated on that note.

---(Scene Break)---

Minerva McGonagall had wasted no time bringing the facts to the headmaster's notice. To her dismay, however, Dumbledore discounted her theory of the death of the unicorns. “There is no evidence, Minerva, that the unicorns have died because of foul play,” he averred. “To claim that is to take things into the realm of conjecture.”

“Albus, the unicorns did not die naturally. For two accidents – both of which involve exsanguination of the unicorns – is to take your theory of coincidence a little too far. Unicorn blood does not have many uses, and none of them innocent. I must insist that you remove the Philosopher's Stone from Hogwarts, lest the fate that befell the unicorns overtake some of our students.”

“I am afraid, Minerva, that it is impossible. The Stone must remain here for its safety.”

“And what about the safety of the students?” wondered Minerva.

“I have taken every precaution to ensure that no harm comes to any of our students. Please do not insinuate that I do not take the security of the students seriously!” There was stern reproof in the headmaster’s voice.

“I don’t insinuate – I state it outright! The school is not a bank vault for priceless treasures. Our principal task is to educate our students, and ensure their well-being. If saving the Stone endangers our primary objective, I cannot condone such actions. If you refuse to remove the Stone from the school, I will have no option but to bring the matter to the notice of the Board and let them decide.”

Dumbledore fumed under the threat. He pleaded once more with his deputy, “Minerva, consider the effects of what you are saying. To take the Stone away from the Hogwarts is to ensure that it falls into the hands of those who are lustng for it.”

“Do you know who is after it?” demanded McGonagall.

Dumbledore sighed wearily, “I do not know for sure, but the first attempt in the Gringotts was made by Voldemort’s followers.”

McGonagall flinched at the name, but she recovered her composure swiftly. “If they were after the Stone then, it is not illogical to assume they may still be looking for it and they might – I say might – possibly be the ones responsible for the death of the unicorns?”

“It is possible,” conceded Dumbledore, “although I think you are still being too fanciful in considering the deaths of the unicorns to be deliberately perpetrated.”

Minerva snorted. “Albus, you cannot believe that the extraordinary events this year are all completely the long arm of coincidence. The fact that the first attempt was made by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s followers confirms to me that they are still after the Stone. You must remove it from the school soon!”

“Please consider ...”

“No, Albus! Too long have I acquiesced in things that I cannot in good conscience permit! The Stone represents a peril that would be folly to ignore. For the safety of our students, it must go!”

Dumbledore nodded in resignation, “Very well, Minerva. Give me two weeks. I will make alternate arrangements for it and move it away from the school.”

Minerva nodded and left, leaving Dumbledore fuming with fury. He pondered over the last conversation. It had been a very long time since one of the staff had come to him demanding compliance or issuing ultimatums. This newfound rebellion of Minerva was going to make things a lot more complicated in the years to come. It was not the thought of her going to the Board that worried the headmaster. He could handle that bunch quite competently if necessary. It was the thought that she no longer trusted his judgement on matters that did not directly concern Harry. Harry Potter was coming to be as much an influence on Minerva as she was having on him. It would be necessary to break up that link of Harry before the situation deteriorated further.

He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fire and called, “Severus, please meet me in ten minutes.”

---(Scene Break)---

McGonagall had come good and delivered on her promise. She informed Harry of her success on the same day. Harry and his friends were, as usual, assembled in a classroom, talking about the recent events. When Harry told them what McGonagall had told him, Justin leant back in his chair with a relieved sigh, “That takes care of it!”

Susan Bones remonstrated mildly, “Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.”

“What does that mean?” asked Millicent.

“What does that mean?” echoed Susan in surprise. “Just this. The Stone is not yet out of Hogwarts, and until it is, it would be silly to

relax. If Harry's theory is right, and the person who is after the Stone is inside Hogwarts, it is likely he may attempt to get the Stone before it is moved away!"

"But no one knows that it is going to be taken away!" protested Hermione.

"Can we be sure of that?" questioned Susan. "The Philosopher's Stone being at Hogwarts was supposed to be a secret, and yet we find someone trying to go after it. Why would the news that it is going to be moved away be a secret?"

There were uncomfortable glances all round. There was no reason to suppose that they were out of danger yet. Harry nodded to Susan, "What would you suggest, Susan? What do you think we should do?"

"First, we know that the Stone is being guarded behind that Third Floor trapdoor. It is all well and good to have magical protections, but all static defences can be breached given enough time and patience. If the person going after the Stone has been in Hogwarts for a long time - after all, everyone inside the school has been here from the beginning of this year - it is quite safe to assume that he knows about the protections and will have made his plans accordingly."

"Very likely," conceded Tony. "But go on – what would you suggest?"

"That we take turns guarding it every night under Harry's invisibility cloak, making sure that no somnambulists take a stroll in that direction!"

"You would stay on guard outside the door of the Cerberus?" asked Harry in surprise.

"We need to stay well away from the door, of course. If the person performs a proximity spell and finds us, we are going to be dead. So we stay on guard in a place where we can observe the door and yet get away if anyone goes there. That is the only way to be sure that the Stone remains safe," returned Susan.

"And if you find someone going after the Stone?"

We come back and alert McGonagall. Under no circumstances are we to try to stop the person. Whoever it is is likely to be very dangerous!"

Harry had recognised Susan's better knowledge of what to do when confronted with security situations of the sort they were facing. He deferred to her wisdom on that score. Susan went on thoughtfully, "Whoever trapped and killed the unicorns is likely very powerful. It is unlikely, therefore, that a student would be able to do it. So, it has to be a teacher."

Hermione looked deeply uncomfortable at the assertion, but could find no counter example to it. The others nodded pensively and the Hufflepuff girl went on, "So the person is unlikely to go after the Stone during daytime. All teachers have nearly full schedules and anyone skipping classes will be missed. Any cancelled classes are reported to the Headmaster, so going after the Stone during daytime is too dangerous – the alarm might be sounded any minute."

The others all nodded, so Susan continued her exposition, "That leaves evening and night times. This would be the ideal time for our friend to go after the Stone. He will have time on his hands, and also, if he succeeds, will have time to get away from the school before the others notice. That means we will have to guard the Stone every night for the next two weeks. Is that acceptable?"

There was some grumbling at the lost sleep, but everyone recognised the necessity of the step. Susan continued, "My suggestion is that two of us take the watch every night, with one person sleeping while the other guards. Four hour shifts would be ideal – not too tiring, but not too short either. Is that agreed?"

Harry answered for everyone. "Sue, that plan is superb. We'll begin tonight. I'll take tonight – who wants to come with me?"

Justin offered, and soon the pairs were decided – Harry, and Justin, for one pair, Susan and Hermione for the second, Sakarbal and Antony for the third and Daphne and Millicent for the last. The group sauntered down to the hiding place of the stone and scouted out a

bench close to the window in an adjacent room, from which the trapdoor was visible, and yet a getaway, if one became necessary would be easy. Susan reminded them to keep a broom with them at all times they were guarding the Stone. This, she pointed out, would be a safety precaution they could ill afford to ignore. Harry and his friends seemed all set for the job. As they were about to break up, Susan spoke up again. "Harry, did McGonagall say what defences are there round the Stone?"

Harry shook his head. Susan mused, "If we were going after the Stone, what would we choose to do?"

Harry thought for a moment, "We would be researching the defences."

"Exactly!" Susan nodded happily at him. "I think it would not hurt for us to research the defences ourselves."

"But we don't know what defences there are," objected Sakarbal.

"We know of one – the Cerberus. How does one get past a Cerberus?"

There were no answers to this question. Harry answered, "I think we might spend what free time we have researching that dog of Hagrid's."

---(Scene Break)--

Harry's precautions were destined to come to a very strange ending. All his preventive measures had been predicated on the fact that he would be able to alert teachers of the thief going after the Stone. It had not occurred to him that the potential thief would be able to go after the Stone and none of the teachers – the teachers who mattered anyway – would be around. Besides, Harry and his group had factored that they would be going up against Quirrell – they had failed to take into account what they would term later, 'The Voldemort effect'. Consequently, the first warning that anything was wrong came in the form of a bombshell.

Voldemort had been at least as scrupulous about scouting his prospective quarry as Harry and his group had been assiduous in protecting it. There was no way that the invisibility cloak would deceive the Dark Lord. Therefore, Voldemort had observed Harry and his group keeping watch on the trapdoor. Ironically, it was their watch on that door that gave him an idea to get past the Cerberus.

It all began on a Friday evening. Harry and Justin were guarding the Stone when they saw Quirrell walk boldly to the room with the trapdoor. Petrified with astonishment, the duo watched and a few seconds later, they heard a deep growling snarl, and a moment later, Quirrell was running out of the room with the cerberus hot on his heels. To their dismay, Quirrell fled straight at them, his speed astonishing considering that he seemed to be outrunning a hell hound with no visible effort. Just as he turned in the doorway that concealed them, he whipped out his wand, pointed it at the two Hufflepuffs, and muttered something that sent them sprawling backwards, the invisibility cloak that covered them flying off their shoulders. At the same moment, he himself vanished into thin air with an invisibility charm, leaving the two students staring at the huge beast of Hagrid.

Harry recovered first. The beast was slowly advancing towards them, a deep growl emanating from its throat, when Harry swiftly pulled Justin on to his broom and took to the air. He had drawn his wand and a simple pushing hex was sufficient to shatter the glass of the still closed window. The duo then flew out of the window leaving the snarling dog gazing impotently after them. Landing outside, the two Hufflepuff students quickly made their way to the room where the remainder of the group would be for the evening.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry and Justin burst into the room, and announced what had happened. For a moment, there was cacophony and everyone was speaking, incoherent and inarticulate. Harry fired off a loud burst of noise from his wand and took command of the situation. First and foremost, he was certain that Quirrell was now after the Stone. He spoke sharply, "We need to tell McGonagall about this."

Both Rosier, and Daphne had gone ashy pale. Rosier whispered softly, "Harry, most of the teachers are in the Ministry today. There is a meeting between the Ministry officials, independent experts and a Hogwarts delegation about the quality of the syllabus."

"But someone must be here. Who ...?"

Susan had already rushed to a portrait – the portrait of Prof. Armando Dippet, which hung just outside the room – and called, "Prof. Dippet! Is Prof. McGonagall in the school today?"

The wizard who had been reading something, looked up, "I'm afraid not. She's at the Ministry today."

"Dumbledore, Flitwick, Sprout?" queried Harry.

"Prof. Dumbledore left on some business an hour ago. Profs. Sprout and Flitwick are also at the Ministry."

"Who's in charge in the school today?"

"Severus Snape!"

Harry and his group looked at each other with expressions ranging from shock through dismay to horror. There was no way in hell that they would be able to convince Snape of anything they said, far less something as outre as the possible theft of the Stone. Harry interrupted, "Professor, can you tell me which teachers are in school now?"

The former headmaster answered readily, "Professors Snape, Binns, Trelawney, Vector, Kettleburn, Burbage and Babbling."

"Circe's toenails!" murmured Daphne. "There's no way we'll be able to convince any of them – we don't even know them properly."

Harry was thinking furiously. He spoke quietly, "Daphne, Sak – what about your parents? Or your aunt, Sue? Can they help?"

Rosier answered, "My parents and Daphne's parents are in the same meeting as McGonagall and the rest of the teachers."

Susan replied, "My aunt must be in her office. Let me see if I can reach her!" She dashed off to the nearest fire, and picking up a pinch of floo powder, tossed it in. To the horror of Susan Bones and her friends, the fire did not change colour and remained a fiery orange instead of the deep green tinge which it took when floo powder ignited. Tony muttered from behind, "The floo's been switched off!"

"Maybe we could try another fire ..." began Millicent, but Harry cut her off, "Useless! If Quirrell sabotaged this fire, he would not have left others working."

Tony agreed, "The grid looks turned off. It would be in the headmaster's office, and it has been turned off!"

Hermione whispered, "What do we do now? Should we send an owl to Prof. McGonagall?"

"Too slow," replied Tony. "Quirrell will have the Stone long before we get any help."

Harry took command of the situation. "We need help. We cannot face Quirrell alone. The quickest way to contact people who can help is to floo from Hogsmeade. Sak, Hermione – you two go to this meeting and try to get McGonagall and the other teachers, apart from Sak's and Daphne's parents. Sue, – go and try to get your aunt. The rest of us will go after Quirrell and delay him!"

Rosier suggested, "Harry, it might be a good idea to get Narcissa as well. Lucius is a school governor, after all."

Harry nodded, "Millicent – contact Narcissa and tell her of what's happening. And do it fast."

Such was the power of Harry's leadership and the aura of his charisma that none of the others objected to what was blatantly illegal – leaving the school without permission, and going to an area of the

school that had been specifically forbidden to students. With curt nods, they all vanished.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry and his friends had been as diligent about researching the three headed dog as Voldemort himself had been. They knew that a powerful songster could enchant a cerberus to sleep, and thanks to Justin, they had a way past that beast. Justin's powers were nowhere nearly as mature as a full fledged songster's but he was reasonably certain that sitting on a broom high above the cerberus, he could distract it long enough with his singing to allow the others to get past the dog. This was accomplished thanks to his abilities – his song did not lull the beast to sleep, but his gentle note, soothing, engaging and conciliatory, nevertheless sufficed to grab its attention and lull its suspicion long enough for Harry, Daphne and Tony to sneak past the dog covered by the invisibility cloak.

Harry, Daphne, and Tony stepped beyond the trapdoor and dropped about a dozen feet into a mass of soft, squishy flora. It was a devil's snare and it immediately grabbed both Harry and Tony, while Daphne leapt clear of the mess. Daphne saw the plant wrapping its tendrils round the two Hufflepuffs, whipped out her wand and casually whispered a spell. A jet of bright flames spat from her wand and lashed out at the plant, which visibly cringed when it sensed the heat and the light. Harry and Tony disentangled themselves as the plant retreated, and Tony gasped, "What the deuce was it?"

"A devil's snare," returned Daphne nonchalantly. "It thrives in damp and dark areas. It is used sometimes to trap nocturnal animals – it is very sweet smelling and attracts small animals. They are its prey."

"Is this one of the defences for the Stone?"

"If so, it is a very poor one," commented Daphne. "There are plenty of more deadly plants, more capable plants. Herbs which can knock out any human, or even plants which can capture and hold people. If this is one of the defences, it is rather crude. It's no threat to anyone prepared, as we just proved!"

Harry looked thoughtfully, but indicated that they should continue on.

The next stage involved catching a flying key with a broom that had been conveniently kept at hand. Harry managed to catch the key with contemptuous ease – it was not even as good as a snitch at evading his hands.

Tony muttered, “The broom was kept conveniently around for us, wasn't it?”

Harry nodded grimly. He had a strange feeling about it – a feeling that there was a lot more wrong than just the Stone at peril.

The third stage involved playing against a bunch of transfigured chessmen, which, in Tony's opinion, did not play well at all. Anthony Goldstein managed to defeat them in less than fifteen minutes, making caustic, cutting remarks about the ability – or lack thereof – of the opposing pieces. The fourth stage was one which they did not have to contend with at all – a troll that had conveniently been knocked out by Quirrell in his progress. The final stage involved a trivial crossword puzzle – something which would never have challenged a half-decent crossword solver for more than a minute. Harry solved it in less than a minute, and pointed to the bottle which contained the potion that would allow one to go through the blue fire.

“How d'you know that's the one?” asked Daphne.

“All the information we need is here.”

The only problem was that the bottle holding the potion contained very little of it – there was barely enough for two people. Harry looked up grimly at his friends, “Which of us will go through to tackle Quirrell?”

Both his friends volunteered. Harry considered. Daphne was cool, and relentless, but she lacked the ruthlessness if it came to a fight. Her instincts were those of a healer, not a killer. She would be of lesser consequence in a fight – if it came to a fight with Quirrell. He pushed a large bottle towards Daphne, “That will get you back past the purple fire,” he informed the pureblood Slytherin. He picked up

another bottle and handed it to Daphne. "That bottle is a poison, from the descriptions here. Go and watch over the troll we passed, Daph. If it shows signs of waking, pour the poison down its throat!"

"What?!"

"Do you want to fight a full grown troll that has been hurt? If we make it out of this place, we will need to get past that troll and we need the path clear. If it as much as shows signs of waking, pour the poison down the troll's throat! Tony and I will, in the meantime, go and tackle Quirrell!"

"Harry!"

"Look, I don't like this any more than you do, Daph. But it's got to be done."

"Good luck, you two," whispered Daphne, staring in helpless anguish and horror as Harry and Tony swallowed the remaining potion, and stepped through the blue fire to meet Quirrell, neither of them looking back.

---(Scene Break)---

Hermione, Sakarbal, Susan and Millicent had faithfully attempted to follow Harry's instructions. They quickly made their way to the main gate, but found it closed, locked and barred. Sakarbal murmured, "What now? We certainly can't force our way past that."

Hermione agreed, "We need to find another way. But how ..."

"We can still send a message by owl," suggested Susan.

"The centaurs might help us," interjected Millie.

"The Weasley twins are said to know other routes out of the school," commented Hermione.

Rosier was looking thoughtful. He sighed finally, "I have an idea. Crazy, but it might just work. Look – we had best separate and go

ahead with our ideas. Millie – try to get the centaurs' help. Hermione, go on and see if the Weasley twins can assist. Sue – write notes to everyone you can think of that might be of use and send the owls. I, in the meantime, will try my idea to see if it works."

"What're you going to do?" asked Millicent, looking askance at Rosier.

"Try out a little idea of mine. We'll see if it works," returned Rosier grimly.

---(Scene Break)---

"Fred, George – a minute," called Hermione.

"What does our," began one of the twins

"resident bookworm," continued the other

"want?" they both finished.

"I need you to tell me how to get to Hogsmeade without passing the front gate." Hermione did not beat about the bush.

"Why?"

Hermione returned, "It's important."

"To tell McGonagall about us knowing it?"

"I won't be telling McGonagall," returned Hermione hotly.

"Dumbledore, then?" mocked one of them.

"Or would you write to the board?" sneered the other.

Hermione gritted, "Look – I'm not trying to get you in trouble. This is very important and I need to get to Hogsmeade immediately!"

"You can always ask Filch to let you out, Ms. Rule Follower," they replied mockingly before turning their backs on her. Too long had

Hermione quoted the rules and encouraged, nay even demanded, that everyone follow them that no one was willing to believe that Hermione Granger wanted to break a school rule. She was left with tears of frustration, a victim of her own success in following the school rules.

---(Scene Break)---

Susan Bones had been scribbling notes furiously to her aunt Amelia, apart from Narcissa Malfoy, the Lords Lestrange, Greengrass, and Rosier, apart from Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore. Having completed her task, she went on to the school owlery, only to find it shut, all the owls locked in, and the hated caretaker standing guard outside the owlery. Horrified for a moment, she turned to Filch. "Mr. Filch, I need to send a message immediately."

"Sorry, girl." growled the man. "The owlery has been locked down. I've got orders not to let anyone use the owlery."

"Whose orders?" questioned Susan, a horrible suspicion flashing across her mind.

"Never you mind, you little ninny!" snapped Filch. "Now get going! The owlery's locked down until I get orders to unlock it."

Susan thought for a moment. To obey the order would be what was demanded of her. However, if she obeyed the order, Harry might pay a high price, perhaps his life. Susan was not under any illusions about Harry's chances if he faced off against Quirrell. The Defence teacher might be a crook, but he was no fool. Her lips compressed and her eyes shining with her resolution, she drew her wand from her pocket. "Stand back!" she ordered Filch. "This is more important than you know!"

"Why you ...!" the caretaker sprang on the Hufflepuff girl, his face suffused with fury.

"Petrificus Totalus!" There was no hesitation in Susan's voice. Filch's limbs snapped together and he fell to the ground, stiff as a board.

Stepping over his body with nary a glance backward, Susan flicked her wand towards the owlery door, “Alohomora!”

---(Scene Break)---

Millicent had dashed into the forest, looking for the centaurs. She ran into a black haired, wild looking centaur first, and dropped a curtsy, less from etiquette than because her knees were sinking beneath her. She had been running almost non-stop for the last fifteen minutes and was quite tired. “Sir,” she gasped as the shaggy black haired centaur gazed in an unfriendly manner towards her. “We need your help.”

The centaur almost sneered, “What makes you think we will aid you, human?”

“I am Millicent Bulstrode,” she introduced herself, before continuing, “It’s vitally important that ...”

The centaur took no notice of her words. He lowered a lance towards her and pointed her back towards Hagrid’s hut. “Get back to your people. You don’t belong in the Forest.”

“But ...” stuttered Millicent.

“Get going,” snarled Bane, for that, they would learn, was the name of the uncooperative centaur, prodding Millicent lightly in the back with his lance.

The heavy set girl stumbled back in shock, and Bane marched off the girl towards Hagrid’s hut, a grimly satisfied smile on his face.

---(Scene Break)---

Sakarbal Rosier hurried down towards the lake to the edge of the water. In the days past, the Rosiers had been always phenomenal navigators and had all but ruled the waters – this was one reason why they were such good astronomers. It was a direct natural consequence of their navigational skills, for which a thorough knowledge of astronomy was a prerequisite. One of the talents they

had developed in the days when they ruled the waves was an ability to walk on water for short distances. It was true that this particular talent had been less and less used in recent times, when other means of travel became more common, but it had not degenerated totally for all that. Sakarbal Rosier was still capable of that particular feat.

On the flip side, the lake at its narrowest point spanned more than sixty yards. Rosier had practised his skill off and on on puddles and ponds in the Rosier estate, but he had never faced anything like a large and deep lake filled with all manner of dangerous creatures. If he failed, it would likely cost his life – the beings in the lake would see to it. This was the very reason that precluded swimming across the lake – once the water was disturbed enough, it would draw all manner of creatures to that unnatural disturbance. Magical aquatic creatures were very sensitive to water current changes and capable of detecting and differentiating various species merely based on the type of water disturbance. But if Rosier did not attempt, he did not for a moment doubt that it would cost the lives of Harry and the others who were now working towards stopping Quirrell. He nodded resolutely to himself, coolly removed his shoes and socks, and stepped on the water.

The water lapped at his feet and the warmth of the May time lake encouraged him initially. Twenty paces on, his magic was beginning to feel the effort he was putting into his attempt. Thirty paces, and his compressed lips and gritted teeth betrayed the strain. Another ten, and Rosier was dragging his feet along the surface of the water. The drain on the magic was becoming too great, he could not pause to recuperate, and every step further was becoming an effort of will. Sakarbal Rosier was not a wizard famed for his sheer strength of magic. How he managed to cover the last few paces, Rosier would never know. Cover them, however, he did and literally collapsed into the soft sand on the far side of the lake. Lying on the sand, he propped himself up on an elbow and, staring at the sinking sun, reflected that he had merely crossed the first hurdle of his course. He now needed to make his way to Hogsmeade and alert his parents, Daphne's parents, Prof. McGonagall and the others. Drawing on his last reserves of strength, he staggered to his feet and stumbled towards the village of Hogsmeade.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry and Tony stepped through the barrier of blue flames and came face to face with Prof. Quirrell, who had whipped round in time to see who had dared disturb him. "Potter," he murmured. "I wondered if I would be meeting you tonight."

Harry smiled amiably, "Good evening, Prof. Quirrell. Fancy meeting you here. Any luck with the Stone?"

Quirrell pointed his wand at Harry's face. "What do you know about the Stone?" he hissed.

Harry smiled inwardly. This was going better than he had dared hoped for. He knew that he and Tony stood absolutely no chance if they fought against the Defence teacher. Their best chance was to stall and keep Quirrell talking. He smiled, "Now really, Professor, what do you want to know? You have asked me such an expansive question."

"How did you find out about the Stone?"

Harry replied carelessly, "Clues to it have been lying all over the place. Tell me, did you attempt to rob Gringotts for it?" As he stepped forward to face Quirrell, he signalled Tony to move away so that they would both not be in the same line of fire.

Quirrell's face reflected a moment's panic, "My Master was most displeased with me when I failed to get the Stone from Gringotts. He has kept a closer watch on me since."

"Your Master?" inquired Harry, puzzled.

"Oh yes," replied Quirrell. "He is a great wizard."

"Sir," interrupted Anthony. "Did you set that troll on Harry?"

Quirrell nodded, "My Master wanted me to test him, to see if he was worthy." He eyed Potter with thinly veiled contempt, "You really are a

fool, Potter. You could have been a great wizard, you could have learnt the Dark Arts from its greatest exponent, and yet you chose to throw it all away.”

“How so?”

“We tried so hard to teach you the Dark Arts, tried to help you see that it is just power that matters. Yet like an idiot, you had to refuse to learn, clinging to weak sentiments.”

Harry wondered, “Did you curse me with the insomnia jinx? And poison me as well?”

“Poison?” Quirrell looked faintly interested. “No, I had nothing to do with any poisoning attempt. I did cast the insomnia jinx on you though, to coax out your darkness. Now be quiet – I need to examine this mirror. It is the key to finding the Stone.”

A voice came from Quirrell, yet not Quirrell's voice. “Potter! It is fortunate you did come along. You were responsible for my present state, so it would be ironically fitting if you aided me in amending your mistake!”

Harry and Tony looked startled, as the high cold voice continued, addressing Quirrell, “Use the boy. He can find the Stone.”

Quirrell pointed Harry towards the mirror, and commanded, “Look in the mirror and tell me what you see.”

Now this was the last thing that Harry wanted. He knew that his lifespan would be very brief once Quirrell found the Stone and he did not want to find out where the Stone was. Nevertheless, he could not but obey Quirrell's commands at wandpoint and when he looked in the Mirror, to his utter horror, the Mirror put the Stone in his pocket. Harry stared uncomprehending at the wretched reflection of his that was smirking as he, Harry, looked terrified.

“Potter,” snarled Quirrell from behind. “What do you see?”

Harry lied, speaking of inconsequential things he claimed to have seen, but the voice from inside Quirrell called his lie, and Quirrell grabbed Harry in his fury, determined to choke the truth out of him. However, to everyone's surprise, he let out a yelped oath, as his hands were burnt from the mere contact with Harry. At the same time, Tony who had moved behind Quirrell, sent a body bind spell at Quirrell. The defence teacher was nowise taken by surprise. He easily moved out of the way and with a casual wave of his wand sent Tony flying into the far wall. The Ravenclaw collided with the stone barrier with a sickening crunch and collapsed in a heap, moving not at all. Quirrell raised his wand again to finish him off, but Harry had utilised the respite to leap near the fire. As Quirrell raised his wand, Harry cried, "Stop, or I destroy the Stone!" That got the Defence instructor's attention and he turned round to see Harry standing near the blue flames, holding the Stone lightly in his fingers just out of reach of the flames.

He calmly remarked, "I would advise you not to do anything rash, Professor! My fingers are jittery and it would be an awful tragedy if something would happen to the Stone." Harry was badly worried about Tony, but the first thing was to talk their way out of the predicament.

"Let me speak to the boy," came the high cold voice from within Quirrell. After some hesitation, Quirrell agreed and turned round, allowing Harry Potter to come face to face with the killer of his parents – the Dark Lord, Voldemort.

For a minute, Voldemort explained his predicament to Harry and demanded the Stone. Harry laughed coldly, "What do I get if I give you the Stone?"

"You'll be at my side. You'll have honour and rewards ..."

Harry cut in coldly, "Not good enough. The moment I give you the Stone, you'll kill both Tony and me. I've no reason to trust you."

"Harry, for all my sins, I've never lied to you. I don't need to lie. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by standing at my side."

"You killed my parents!" snarled Harry.

"I killed your father, yes, but I had nothing to do with your mother's death," remarked Voldemort. "As for your father, he opposed me and fought against me. He was an enemy soldier, Harry, and I fought him!"

Harry was staring in shock and horror at Voldemort's pronouncement, his mouth agape. Taking advantage of Harry's shock, the Dark Lord took a step towards the dark haired Hufflepuff, but Harry dropped the Stone and grabbed it just before it hit the flames. "Stand back! I'll trust you no nearer to my person than I have to!"

"Come now, Harry, there is no need to fight me. I've never been an enemy of yours!"

"You had Quirrell curse me!"

"I had Quirrell test you, yes, and I only did what I thought was best for you. Now give me the Stone and you will go free!"

Harry shook his head, "I don't think so. I know what you've done to Quirrell. He's dead already because of you and you know it!"

"He was a weak fool whom I managed to subvert during his travels and he has served his purpose. He is of no consequence."

Harry filed away the information, but was outraged, "People are not clothing to be used and thrown away. He even drank unicorn blood for you! If that's how you treat your followers, I don't even want to think of what you do to your enemies. You are a monster and what your pretence is useless with me. Stay back! At the first step you take in my direction, I toss the Stone into the fire!"

"You'll beg for death when I'm finished with you, boy!" snarled Voldemort, his temper getting better of him for the first time.

"That won't bring back the Stone," returned Harry coolly. "Now, let us talk like reasonable people. What guarantees do I have you won't kill my friend and me if I give you the Stone?"

"None," returned Voldemort smoothly. "You'll have to trust me."

"I am not that stupid. Let us talk of other means," responded Harry icily.

Voldemort had been gathering all of Quirrell's magic for a burst of wandless magic, and he applied it now. "Accio!" cried the Dark Lord, wandlessly summoning the Stone from Harry's fingers. Harry tried to grab it, but the spell was too powerful for him and the Stone tore itself from his fingers and flew into Quirrell's outstretched palm. The next events took Harry completely off guard. Voldemort began with a cry of joy, which suddenly turned into an inarticulate bellow of disappointment and frustration. "Fa.." he began, only to have his cry transform into a scream of terror as the body he inhabited was propelled forwards into the flames next to Harry. He struggled madly, trying to get out of the fire, but the strange fire ate his body alive, and the flesh was roasted to a crisp in a matter of seconds. A strange shadow flew out of the fire and dissolved into mist, escaping from the dying professor.

"Are you alright, Harry?" came the concerned voice of Albus Dumbledore, who was standing just behind the mirror, eyeing Harry and the now deceased Quirrell. Harry Potter, had already moved and was examining the fallen body of Tony Goldstein. If Dumbledore could have seen Harry's face, he would have seen that beneath the concern for his friend, Harry Potter looking very thoughtful and preoccupied.

---(Author's Note)---

I saw various comments about Voldemort being the heir of Slytherin and consequently being able to lead the purebloods. However, that assertion overlooks one major thing. First, for quite sometime, Volddmort himself would not have known of his ancestry. Secondly, boasting is the favourite pastime of the Slytherins, it seems. Many times would the 'heir of Slytherin' claim have been made before. There is no way that Voldemort would have been able to prove his Slytherin ancestry while he was still at school, other than exhibit his parseltongue abilities. I seriously doubt that he confided in his friends

that he was the one who loosed the basilisk on the muggleborn students. It is simply too dangerous to give away that kind of secret when at school, given that anyone of them might squeal on him.

The second point that amused me in canon is the way every plot matures in the last couple of weeks of School. It may tie in with the idea of bringing things to a climax at the end of the year, but gives the idea that it is arranged from above. Therefore, I decided to polish off Quirrell with about a month of school left. It also gives me time to write the last covering bits with some freedom.

Thanks to my beta readers Abstract Error and Voice of the Nephilim.

## The Roaring Snake – 27

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am just playing in the world created by JKR. As usual, all criticism is welcome

### Attempted Reconstructions

Harry Potter was bending over the prone form of Anthony Goldstein, praying to every deity that his friend would live. His prayers were answered as he felt a steady pulse at the base of the throat. Dumbledore took over at that moment. He nudged Harry away and waved his wand over the prone form of Anthony Goldstein a couple of times, each time the fallen boy glowed with a variety of colours. Next, the headmaster conjured a stretcher and levitated Goldstein onto it. Turning to Harry, he smiled, "He should be fine, Harry. He has been knocked out, but no harm seems to have been done. We will let Mme. Pomfrey examine him to make sure." He examined Harry critically for a minute, before finally asking, "Are you alright, Harry?"

Harry sagged visibly in relief, but nodded quietly in assent. He remarked, "I am glad you got here in time, sir. I heard you were away."

"I have just returned, Harry. I noticed the alarms to this place going off and immediately I rushed down here."

Harry's head snapped up at that, but he did not comment. Now that he was assured of Tony's well-being, his mind was beginning to race, evaluating the events of the previous few hours with his usual detachment. Harry had many powers that others might envy, but his greatest power was his ability to appraise events and people, even when they affected him personally, with an academic detachment. Even as he stumbled in Dumbledore's wake, he wondered about one thing Dumbledore had done – or more accurately, not done. That implied a terrible thing for Harry. He would need to test his deductions.

Mme. Pomfrey fussed over him, even when he assured her that he had not been remotely harmed. She insisted that he stay in the hospital wing overnight for observation and for once, Harry did not argue. He needed to think and away from the hustle and bustle of the

school was fine. He inquired about Goldstein's condition, but was assured by the Matron that the Ravenclaw would be fine and he could speak to his friend after the latter had managed to get a good night's rest. Harry was more worried about his friends whom he had sent to get reinforcements. What had happened and how had they fared? But one fact worried him most of all - Dumbledore's conduct after the death of Quirrell. It was strange and incoherent. But the headmaster never did anything without a reason.

But if the headmaster had indeed done what he suspected, he would need help. His magical skills were nowhere nearly sufficient to handle the task, and Harry suspected that his friends, talented as they were, were also incapable of the feat. He needed the assistance of an adult – the only question was whom he could trust. McGonagall was a distinct possibility. Harry thought of the parents and guardians of his friends – Mme, Bones, Lord and Lady Rosier, Lord and Lady Greengrass, They were all possibilities, and while his preference was to seek the assistance of McGonagall, there was the undeniable fact that McGonagall had been unable to help him in the business regarding the train compartment. She was no Charms expert and if what Harry suspected was true, then he would need the help of a Charms master. Lady Berenice fitted the bill perfectly – she had forgotten more about charms than most people would learn in their lifetimes. He would speak with her and would rather handle things quietly, if possible.

---(Scene Break)---

While Harry was ruminating on the outcome of his friends' efforts and Dumbledore's latest actions, the wily headmaster was being besieged by an irate, if disparate, group of wizards and witches. Among the ones who had arrived to chastise the old Chief Warlock were Lady Narcissa Black-Malfoy, and the head of DMLE, Lady Amelia Bones, apart from the lords and ladies Greengrass and Rosier and Lady Wilkes. Minerva McGonagall, torn between her loyalty to the school and her horror of what was happening there, stood apart, irresolute and uncertain. She spoke little throughout the interchange that was to follow between the angry school governors and the headmaster.

Their first concern was about the condition of Harry Potter and the other students. When assured that he and his friends in school were fine and were sleeping in the hospital wing, they demanded to know what had transpired in the school. Dumbledore told them as much as he thought was prudent for them to know. He told them that Nicholas Flamel and his wife had left the country the previous spring for Switzerland, since their health was failing even with the elixir of life. They had asked Dumbledore to care for their possessions in their absence. Dumbledore had placed the Stone in Gringotts, but had brought the Stone to the school temporarily to protect it after the burglary attempt in Gringotts. He had been making alternative arrangements for the Stone when Quirrell had tried to steal it. He had been foiled in the attempt and killed.

When they had heard the story, they turned to reproach Dumbledore for his folly. Without any ado, Amelia Bones had opened her questioning, “Why did you bring the Philosopher’s Stone into the school, Albus?”

“I feared that Voldemort’s followers were after the Stone, Amelia. I brought it here after the attempt on it in Gringotts.”

“Are you insane, headmaster?” demanded Narcissa. “You brought a dangerous artefact into a school full of children, knowing that the Dark Lord’s followers were after it? Do you even care for their well-being?”

“I assure you, Narcissa, that all efforts were made to keep it secret, and protect both the students and the Stone.”

“It does not seem to have worked. It appears that one of your own faculty chose to attempt to steal the Stone and it required students to nearly sacrifice themselves to save it!” bit back Amelia.

“Harry Potter’s intervention was quite unnecessary. I was quickly there and I was able to stop Quirrell before he could attempt anything. But in one thing you are right, Amelia. Alas – the curse of greed!” sighed Dumbledore wearily. “I fear that my hopes that my staff would be immune to it were misplaced.”

“Indeed!” sneered Lord Rosier. “Your hopes seem to continually lead you astray, Chief Warlock. And you have ended with the near death of Harry Potter and the destruction of a very important artefact.”

“As for the Stone, I have Nicolas' permission to destroy it if it were in peril of falling into untrustworthy hands.” Dumbledore reached into his pocket and produced a letter, which he handed to Rosier. “Here is the letter from Nicolas, before he left for Switzerland last year. You can see how he would rather see the Stone destroyed than fall into Voldemort's possession. As for my trust, one must have some trust in one's own staff, Hamalcar. We cannot go continuously checking every action of everyone. It leads to paranoia and madness!”

Hamalcar and Narcissa were reading the letter, while Andromache flared back, “Your stupidity, on the other hand, nearly led to Harry Potter's death!”

“Blame that idiot boy!” snarled Snape. “He went off to a place where he wasn't supposed to go, where he had been specifically forbidden ...”

“I wasn't talking to you, Snivellus!” snapped Andromache. “Rest assured, you will be answering for your own conduct soon!”

“My conduct?!” Snape's eyebrows went up.

“Yes. Your role in Quirrell's attempt needs to be examined. Were you an accomplice of Quirrell?”

“How dare you?!” snarled Snape.

Andromache raised an eyebrow languidly. “You were in charge of the school for only a few hours and you let Quirrell attempt to steal the Stone during those very hours.”

“That was just coincidence,” blurted out Snape.

“Of course – a pure coincidence” sneered Antisthenes Greengrass. “You were in charge of the school for the first time in your life for only

a few hours and it happened – I say it happened – that Quirrell chose precisely those few hours to attempt to steal the Stone!"

Snape went paler than usual, but Dumbledore broke in, "I trust Severus. I will answer for his conduct."

"You trusted Quirrell, as well. But be sure, headmaster, you will be answering for some of your own conduct," retorted Narcissa icily. "There will definitely be a meeting of the Board on this matter. But that is for the future. Now we need to speak to Harry Potter and reassure ourselves that he is indeed alright."

"You will need to wait until tomorrow," returned Dumbledore. "Madam Pomfrey has given him a sleeping draught and put him in bed for the night."

Priscilla returned, "I will examine him, just to make sure. We don't want him dying in the night due to tragic mistakes, do we?"

"Mme. Pomfrey is quite capable ....," began Dumbledore, but Berenice cut him off smoothly. "I am sure she is quite competent, but she would, I am equally certain, welcome a second opinion. Priscilla here is one of the foremost healers. You surely would rather err on the side of caution in the case of Harry's health, would you not, headmaster?"

Dumbledore bit back an oath with some difficulty. Harry's initiative was proving to be a real bane. Still, he had got the answers he desired, and the destruction of the Stone had been announced. That had to count for something. Further, he knew Harry's feelings on most matters of interest. Now he could carry on his manipulations of Harry without having them traced back to him. Nonetheless, the present situation had become a lot more complicated. Himself, he would have preferred to deal with the parents slowly, once the whole business had died down a bit. At the moment, he could do nothing much to stop Lady Priscilla from examining Harry Potter.

---(Scene Break)---

Lady Priscilla arrived again early next morning before breakfast to examine Harry Potter. She asked him various questions and performed some tests. As she was finishing up, Harry asked her how she had got the news of the school and she told him of Rosier's message to all of those in the Ministry. He had asked them to help Harry. Rosier had also contacted Mme. Amelia Bones, and Narcissa Black-Malfoy, asking them to help. Harry anxiously asked her how his friends were and on being assured they were all well had finally relaxed. When Priscilla asked him for his version of the previous evening's events, he gave it to her completely with one omission. He made no mention of Voldemort possessing Quirrell. He simply let her believe that he had tried to stop Quirrell and that Dumbledore had come in and saved him and Tony and killed Quirrell in the process.

Finally, Harry asked Priscilla, "Nothing wrong with me, I hope?"

Priscilla answered coolly, "You are not suffering from any ill effects from your last night's escapade, if that is what you are asking. But you should still rest today. Tomorrow, you can start going back to class."

Harry nodded in acquiescence at her injunction, and as she was finishing up, asked her if the Lady Rosier, and Mme. Bones were in the school. On being answered in the affirmative, he asked if he could meet them one by one in the order he had mentioned before he left the infirmary. Priscilla was really surprised, but she acquiesced to it.

Harry nodded absently, and thanked her profusely for her kind help. A few minutes later, when Mme. Pomfrey brought him breakfast in the hospital wing, she was accompanied by Narcissa, Minerva and Dumbledore. They inquired about his health, and on being assured, that he was none the worse for the previous night's ordeal, Narcissa suggested, "It might do Potter some good to have a day off, headmaster. Some recreation to take his mind off last night's experiences. Priscilla suggested the same, you know."

"Doubtless, Narcissa," answered Dumbledore graciously. "However, Harry Potter's safety requirements mandate that he stay inside the campus. It is for his own good."

"Oh – come now, Dumbledore – a day in Hogsmeade will do him a world of good and very little harm," argued Minerva.

Dumbledore shook his head firmly. "Hogsmeade is forbidden to first and second years for a reason, Minerva. You know what that is. Harry can have a break from his studies, if he needs it – but I fancy, immersing himself in his studies is the best thing that Harry can have for the time being. It will do him some good to forget this whole Quirrell business." He answered Harry's questioning look with a sigh, "I am sorry, Harry. As your guardian, that is my final word."

Harry sighed and accepted without protest. As they all turned to leave, Harry asked, "Headmaster, I have a question for you, if you don't mind."

"What is it, Harry?"

"How did I get the Stone out of the Mirror, when Quirrell could not?"

"Ah - that was one of my cleverer ideas. Only one who wanted to get the Stone but not use it would be able to get it out of the Mirror."

Harry looked up sharply at that, but made no comment. With that, all the adults left the ward, Priscilla having finished her examination of Harry.

Lady Priscilla had performed the commission assigned her by Harry and informed Berenice of Harry's request. The small and slender Berenice Rookwood-Rosier went in to meet Harry as he was reclining against the pillows of his bed. He greeted her with a bow, and inquired about Sakarbal Rosier. Berenice told him that he was exhausted with his effort in reaching her and her colleagues and was in bed in the Rosier manor, but was otherwise unharmed. As they talked, Harry handed her a piece of parchment. On it was clearly written, 'PLEASE CHECK IF THERE ARE OBSERVATION CHARMS ON ME'

Lady Berenice was certainly very surprised by his request, but she did as he asked. There were no spells on his person, but there was a very powerful listening charm on his invisibility cloak. Lady Berenice

raised her wand to dispel it, but Harry stopped her. He merely shook his head and requested that she change nothing. Instead, he asked her how long the charm had been on the cloak, to which she replied it had been there for quite some time – months at least.

Harry thanked her for help and requested her to thank Sakarbal for him, expressing his hope that the Ravenclaw would be back in the school soon. Lady Berenice took her leave soon after that exchange.

Next to meet with Harry was Lady Amelia Bones. She questioned Harry about Quirrell and he answered everything truthfully, although he made no mention of Voldemort. He told her how he considered going to Snape useless, how he had sent Susan, Millicent, Sakarbal and Hermione to get help, while Daphne, Tony, Justin and himself had gone to head off Quirrell. Amelia admonished him about his recklessness, while Harry pointed out that he had had no other option. The only other choice would be to do nothing and let Quirrell get away with the Stone, and he was not willing to let it happen.

After he was done narrating to her his experiences and defending his actions, he questioned, “Ma'am, have you found anything about the Flamel's? Where are they and why have they left the Stone here?”

“Inquiries are being made, Mr. Potter. While they are yet untraceable, there is no doubt that they have indeed left the country. We have a record of their leaving the Isles early last summer and reaching Switzerland. The Swiss have confirmed their entry into their country. However, we have been unable to trace them further.”

Harry nodded, and pressed another question. “What about Quirrell, ma'am? Does he have any criminal background?”

“Not as far as we have been able to tell. In fact, his behaviour was exemplary, both while he was a student here in Hogwarts, and later as a teacher.”

“Did he have any dark side sympathies?” asked Harry, surprising Mme. Bones.

“No,” replied the stern witch sharply.

Harry pursued, "I am told that Quirrell had taken an year off before returning to Hogwarts this year. Can you trace exactly where he had been?"

Amelia glanced at Harry in genuine astonishment. "Why do you want to know?"

"I have an idea, ma'am, no more. I wish to test it out before I go further. Can you please find out where he had been before returning to Hogwarts?"

"Very well, Harry, I'll do what I can to help," answered Amelia Bones.

"Finally, ma'am, I would be very grateful if you could discover where the Hogwarts faculty were during last spring and summer?"

"What on earth are you upto, Mr. Potter?"

"Nothing at all. I just wish to test out my ideas. Can you please discover that much?"

"I will do so," nodded Amalia.

Again, Harry blurted out his thanks, but made no further inquisition. Lady Amelia had no further inquiries either, so she departed wishing Harry a speedy recovery.

---(Scene Break)---

The next day, Dumbledore announced Quirrell's tragic death and awarded Harry and his friends a ton of points for what he called, 'their resourcefulness, determination, bravery and nobility'. Harry was being congratulated by all his housemates and was the instant hero of Hufflepuff – something that secretly amused the dark haired boy. For months, he had been shunned and reviled by his housemates, suspected of dark side sympathies owing to his refusal to restrict himself to a boundary each defined for the Potter boy. Now, however, with Dumbledore's approbation, all of them were falling over themselves to ingratiate themselves with the supposed protege of

Dumbledore. Harry wondered what they would say if they knew the truth of his relations with the old headmaster, but that was a matter of lesser concern – at least for the moment. Harry had set several trains of inquiry in motion, and was waiting for their results ere he made his choices.

A day later, Harry visited Professor McGonagall. From her account, he learnt that Dumbledore had told the school governors about the attempt of Quirrell and the consequent destruction of the Stone. Harry adroitly pressed her about Voldemort, but discovered that Dumbledore had said nothing at all in that regard. That had settled his questions.

Harry's own efforts to discern the truth would fructify a few days later. One afternoon, with no classes for any of them, Harry simply gestured to his friends to follow him, and to their surprise, led them well past Hagrid's hut into the Forbidden Forest, to a meadow on the shores of the lake. This place had been discovered by Millicent, thanks to some unwitting help from Hagrid and more owing to her own expeditions in the Forest unknown to the others in Harry's group. She had seen the place, and marked it as a possible meeting spot, owing to its proximity to Hogwarts and the edge of the Forest, as well as a clear spot that gave them a good view of the surrounding area and make good their escape, in case some of the darker denizens of the Forest chose to make an attack on the students.

Harry and Millicent led the others to the spot, and everyone dropped down on the lush spring grass, while Harry stood eyeing them all gravely. He began, “I know you are all wondering why we are meeting here today, instead of our usual place in the school. Before we part, I promise you that you shall all share my knowledge. I considered that it would be good to meet here, away from the prying eyes and ears.”

“What do you mean, Harry?” questioned Justin.

“On my invisibility cloak, Lady Berenice found a very powerful listening charm.”

“Who ...” began Hermione, but Harry cut her off, “I think you can guess very well who, Hermione. The cloak was given to me by

Dumbledore and has never been out of my possession since. The charm must have been in place when he gave it to me."

"But since we know now and the charm's removed . . .," began Justin, but Harry cut him off. "Who said the charm's been removed?"

"You've left it there?" inquired a surprised Sakarbal.

"Of course," smiled Harry. "Think of all the false, confusing, and misleading information we'll be able to feed our eavesdroppers!" Harry was clearly mentally rubbing his hands in relish.

Hermione was appalled by what Dumbledore had done, but to the others, it occasioned no real surprise. There were just nods of understanding. Susan enquired, "How did you find out?"

"Dumbledore gave himself away last night. He said he had rushed down to help me against Quirrell as soon as he had returned to Hogwarts. But if he had done that, he would have asked where Sak, Hermione, Susan and Millie were since only four of the eight of us were in the rooms beyond the trapdoor. I talked to Justin and Daphne, and they had not been asked. Since Dumbledore did not ask where the rest of us were, that implied only one thing – he already knew where the others were."

"Secondly, when McGonagall, Lady Malfoy and the other governors arrived here, he showed no real surprise. But how did he know they would arrive? He anticipated it since he knew we had sent off messages. Finally, he did not even ask how they had received warnings – the one inevitable question anyone in his position would have asked. But he didn't need to ask."

Harry continued, "If he had a listening charm on my cloak, it is likely he would have employed other means to spy on us. Inside Hogwarts, I am not sure what place is safe for us to speak privately. So I judged that we had better have this conversation in privacy, since what I have to say today will affect everyone personally."

There were raised eyebrows at this – Harry's earnestness and gravity had succeeded in rousing their curiosity and they listened all attention

to his speech. For the first time, Harry told them the entire truth of what had occurred down in the depths of Hogwarts. He spoke of Voldemort's possession of Quirrell, his reconstruction that the Stone destroyed there was a fake and how Dumbledore had ended in sending Quirrell-Voldemort into the flames that had destroyed his body, leaving Voldemort free to flee from the school. His clear, unimpassioned speech had its effect on his audience. For once, they were all horrified. Susan and Hermione had hands covering their mouths, Justin, Millicent and Tony were looking terrified and even the normally composed and self-possessed Greengrass, and Rosier were gaping at Harry in a mixture of astonishment, worry and fear. When he had finished his account with the death of Quirrell and Dumbledore's arrival, there was a babble of speech and a number of questions were poured on Harry, but the dark haired Hufflepuff simply raised his hand, signalling them to stop. "I will answer all your questions, but first we need some information. "He motioned to Susan, "Sue, can you please tell us what your aunt thinks? Does she know about Voldemort? And, finally, what she can do to help us?"

The pretty Hufflepuff answered, "Let me answer the last question first. She can do nothing officially unless the governors of Hogwarts approach the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for a full investigation. She has absolutely no jurisdiction over Hogwarts. And from what she thinks, it is most unlikely that the governors will press for a full investigation into the matter. Dumbledore has six members of the board on his side, and it is not clear what way Lucius Malfoy or Avery will vote. So all she can do is investigate privately, which she has been doing."

"Why would Lucius Malfoy or Avery vote for Dumbledore?" asked Hermione.

"They won't vote for Dumbledore," returned Sakarbal. "But it is doubtful if they'll vote for us either." Looking at their puzzled glances, he sighed, "Their politics are a touch complicated, but suffice to say that Lord Black and Lady Bones are bitter opponents of Lucius Malfoy and Avery. Even in their own interest, it is hard for the two groups to cooperate."

Susan continued, "She did not know about Voldemort. At least, she never mentioned it to me." Susan paused here, "Did you not tell her about Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head negatively. "Why not?" inquired Daphne.

"I wasn't sure how she would receive it – or even if she would believe me at all. I also wanted to see what Dumbledore would say. If he denied it, I would likely be labelled a liar. Finally, I wanted to investigate some bits myself, so I thought it prudent not to show all my cards."

"I see," returned Susan thoughtfully. "You may have done better to tell her the whole truth. We'll need her help, Harry."

Harry agreed with her, "Perhaps so, Sue. But I am afraid I am rather wary of trusting anyone. If you think it is better for her to know the full story, you may, by all means, tell her."

Susan returned to her account, "She has been successful in discovering the Flamels – or rather, their fate. They are both dead. Auntie went over to Switzerland to interview the healers who attended to them in the Blanc Hospital in Lausanne. The healers testified that the Flamels died of pure old age. No reason to suspect foul play."

"But they had a Philosopher's Stone. Why did they .." began Daphne

"I don't know," returned Susan. "But the Flamels seemed quite content, and relaxed, even relieved that they were dying. They showed no signs of bitterness or annoyance about their impending deaths. No will of any sort has been discovered."

"So, Harry, care to tell us the rest?" Rosier inquired quietly.

"You know all that I know now. What I suspect – that is another thing. But before we go into it, I would like to give you all a choice. You've all seen what's happening around here. It's going to be dangerous staying with me. Quite frankly, if you take my side, you might find yourselves pitted against very powerful opponents. Voldemort just tried to kill Tony and me, and it is obvious that he wouldn't have

hesitated with the others either. If you stay with me, my friends, I will be very grateful for your company and support. Indeed, we could never have handled Quirrell if it were not for all of us working together. Any one of us trying to oppose him individually would be dead. But together, we were able to handle him. However, it is likely going to be very dangerous staying with me, so please think about it. Further, staying with me is also likely to cause complications with both Dumbledore and Voldemort. If you wish to leave, now is the time. If you wish to think about what I have said and need time to make a decision, I will understand." Harry looked at everyone quietly, his eyes asking the question he had posed each of them.

Harry's words had taken everyone except Susan Bones by surprise. Susan, the quintessential Hufflepuff, had realised what he was planning from the moment he had begun speaking of Quirrell. She replied casually, "Harry, your words do your nobility and honour credit, but they are quite unnecessary. I choose to stand by you." Justin, Tony, Millicent and Hermione acquiesced immediately with the Hufflepuff girl, and Harry turned to the two purebloods. "Consider what you are risking ..."

"Harry, we have come this far with you, haven't we?" murmured Daphne absently. "Sak and I won't abandon you now."

Harry relaxed, "Thanks, all of you," he breathed out, gratefully and fervently. "You've no idea what this means to me. Now that that bit is out of the way, let's focus on the Stone business. I will begin by reconstructing the whole affair, and you will tell me if you see any problems with it."

"Now let's try to reconstruct this entire business. Let's cover all the facts, with what we know and what we suspect, using logic to fill in the gaps. Knowing what we know, I'll be very surprised if we can't come up with a nearly complete theory of what's been happening here."

Harry continued, "The whole affair begins with Dumbledore getting control of the Stone. I assume that the note he showed Mme. Bones is genuine, so we may safely assume that Nicolas Flamel did indeed hand over the Stone to Dumbledore before leaving for Switzerland.

What Susan says about their deaths also adds up. The Flamels, for reasons of their own, chose to give up the Stone to Dumbledore and leave, knowing full well they were going to die. In short, they chose to die for reasons of their own. It also agrees with what Mme. Bones has discovered about the Flamels' deaths. Does this hold together?"

Everyone nodded and Harry continued, "The next link is Quirrell. Voldemort remarked that Quirrell was a fool he had bent to his will, so he was not a Death Eater. Thanks to Mme. Bones' investigations of Quirrell's background and history, we know that Quirrell had no known dark side sympathies. So we come to a difficult problem – how did Voldemort manage to possess Quirrell? Is a man who has no dark side sympathies likely to let Voldemort possess him?"

Hermione objected, "Harry, this is You-Know-Who we are talking about. He might have powers that no one else possesses. He could have simply taken over Quirrell's body."

Harry replied, "I did consider that eventuality, Hermione. However, I think it's most unlikely that Voldemort has the power to take over anyone's body he wants. Surely, Hermione, if he had the power to possess people at will, he would have taken over people before now. We know of no person he has managed to possess. He has not been seen since he vanished eleven years ago. Would he have managed to remain completely unseen if he had means of possessing people? Finally, remember he had Quirrell drink servo mortalitas to keep alive. If he could easily take over other people, there would be no need to have recourse to such desperate measures. He could have simply let Quirrell die and choose another host. No – I am almost certain that he cannot possess anyone he wants. The one possessed needs to be willing. However, you're right about one thing. We need to find out about that for sure. That brings us back to our problem. How come Quirrell, a man with no dark side background or sympathies, become so susceptible to Voldemort's will?"

"How do you explain it?" asked Tony.

"I do not have an answer, per se, Tony. I only have a few suspicions. When Mme. Bones sends me answers to some of the questions I asked her, we shall know for certain, I think."

Harry reconstructed, "Next comes the attack on Gringotts. Was the Stone really in Gringotts? Or was the Stone in Gringotts fake as well?"

Susan leaned back, "Considering that Hagrid was sent to retrieve the Stone, I'd say that the Stone there was fake. Hagrid can't keep secrets; I'd say that Dumbledore deliberately arranged for that little show."

"I agree," smiled Harry. "Besides, there's another reason why Hagrid was sent there. We'll come to it presently. But to continue our reasoning. Dumbledore brings the fake stone and sets up a bunch of largely useless protections around the Stone."

"Fluffy wasn't a useless protection," objected Hermione.

"True," agreed Harry. "But we knew about Fluffy in advance, and had had time to prepare for it. Against a prepared wizard, a cerberus is not impassable. But I think you'll agree with me that the other protections were largely useless. After all, if a group of first years weren't taxed any by the protections, it's not likely to test the powers of Quirrell, far less Voldemort. So - why were those protections there at all?"

There was no answer to this, as Harry continued, "I talked to McGonagall about them. It appears that Dumbledore simply got her to transfigure those chessmen - she didn't know how the protections were arranged. Dumbledore gave her the requirements and she transfigured accordingly."

Daphne cut in, "That explains the Devil's Snare"

Harry nodded, "Precisely. I imagine Flitwick was in a similar position about those keys."

"Now I come to the critical part of my reasoning," remarked Harry seriously. "We are agreed that none of the protections were really useful against Voldemort. Remember, Dumbledore knew that Voldemort - or his followers - were after the Stone. So - if he set up a

bunch of useless protections around the Stone, what was the purpose?"

Puzzled and expectant glances were exchanged, but no one made an answer. Harry smiled, "It made no sense at all, you see. If the protections were to keep Voldemort away, they were utterly useless. It was also dangerous – bringing an artefact Voldemort was after into a school of children. Finally, Dumbledore lied in one thing. He said that only one who wanted to get the Stone but not use it would be able to extract it from the Mirror. When I looked in the Mirror, the last thing I wanted was to want to know where the Stone was or get it. Yet I was able to get it out of the Mirror." He continued grimly, "I got the Stone because I was meant to get the Stone. So - what does it all mean?"

Harry smiled, "The protections were useless, the Stone was a fake, and the school was left with no teachers to stop Quirrell. Then I realised that we were approaching the whole puzzle in the wrong way. The protections were meant to be breached, not by Voldemort, but by us! That is why those protections were there."

The rest of them gazed at Harry in shock. "The whole thing becomes utterly simple when we look at it as a test for us. That was why there were simple protections that first years were capable of breaching around a fake Stone. That was why we found clues to it all over the place. Remember that Daily Prophet we saw in Hagrid's hut about the Gringotts' robbery? I had a chat with Hagrid about it and he told me that he and Dumbledore were discussing it just before I met Hagrid. Now that robbery had occurred a month before. Why discuss it suddenly, just before we met Hagrid? The answer is simple – Dumbledore wanted to draw our attention to it."

"That was why he sent Hagrid to retrieve the Stone from Gringotts," burst out Justin. "It was so that we would get our curiosity roused and was a pointer to us to start looking in the direction of the Stone. Also, it was meant to flag our attention to the occurrence."

"Exactly," nodded Harry. "Next – did you never wonder why we were the only ones to run into Fluffy? After all, only one simple *alohomora* spell was required to spell the door to Fluffy open. Surely, others

would have blundered into the beast as well? Why were we the only ones in the entire school who happened to run into it? The answer is simple – because we were meant to. The others were not meant to, so they could not get where the cerberus was stationed. I remember Tony remarking that it would be easy to exclude students from the corridor. In fact, it was done and none of the others could go there. Only we were the exception to the other students!"

Harry continued triumphantly, "Similar is the case with the Mirror I saw when I was wandering around the castle. Hell – I even caught Dumbledore with it. Had I not been totally distracted with my lack of sleep, I would have wondered what Dumbledore was doing there in the dead of the night. He gave me enough clues about how it worked. But he also made a mistake there."

"Finally, the complete lack of trustworthy teachers in the school when Quirrell went after the Stone along with the sabotage of the floor network in the school. It was meant to give Quirrell a chance to go after the Stone, but more importantly, it was also meant to test us – to see what we would do. Whether we would go after the Stone, or whether we would let Quirrell have it. And I have a feeling that Dumbledore wanted me to come face to face with Voldemort. He wanted to test my reaction to Voldemort's presence. And that was how," Harry finished bitterly, "Dumbledore appeared in the nick of the time to save us rather melodramatically and kill Quirrell. That was why the fake Stone was placed in the Mirror. He could afford to lose it."

"There is more to it, Harry," murmured Daphne quietly. "The Stone is openly 'destroyed'. Now, with both you and Dumbledore asserting that the Stone is gone, no one will suspect that it might still be there. Only we, Dumbledore himself and Voldemort know that the real Stone is still around. Dumbledore can announce the destruction of the Stone, while retaining the original himself quietly."

"Absolutely!" smiled Harry. He continued in a pensive voice, "The question that puzzles me most is how Quirrell fell into the clutches of Voldemort. We need to know more about possession, and how it can be achieved. When we have answered that question, we shall have several answers.," remarked Harry absently.

Daphne volunteered, “I can try to find out about that if you like, Harry.”

“Do so,” agreed Harry. “It’d be of great help.”

He returned to earth with a brisk shake of the head. “There’s one other minor point. Quirrell took credit for setting the troll on us and cursing me with the insomnia jinx. But he disavowed all knowledge of poisoning me. I think he was telling the truth. So, who poisoned me?”

There were no answers to it, so they all sat in silence for several minutes. Finally, Justin asked, “What should we do now?”

“We wait for the results of Mme. Bones’ investigations. Then we will know what to do.”

“That’s true, Harry,” answered Susan Bones. “But there’s a lot we can do in the meantime. For one thing, we need to find a new meeting place. We can’t come here everyday. We’ll be caught.”

“True, but I’m not sure what place’ll be safe inside Hogwarts,” muttered Tony.

Harry nodded, “We need to know how Dumbledore can find out about what’s going on. And once we know that, we’ll be able to find a way round it. Hermione, Tony, Sak – can I rely on you three to find out how the headmaster discovers what goes on in the castle?”

“We’ll do our best to learn about it, Harry,” promised Hermione.

“In the meantime, I think we’d better not talk about any of this. We’ll just discuss school stuff and academics,” added Sakarbal.

Harry agreed. “That was my plan. For the time being, we choose one day in a week to sneak out here and talk. The rest of the time, we meet in school and discuss only innocuous material.”

“It won’t do to completely skip talking about this matter, Harry,” warned Tony. “If Dumbledore hears nothing of our discussions about this, he will suspect we are on to his game.”

“So what should we do?” asked Justin.

“The trick will be to discuss just enough to put him off, but not enough to betray ourselves,” smiled Tony.

“Next, Harry,” added Susan, “if we are going up against Dumbledore, we'll need more help. The eight of us and our families simply aren't enough to go up against Dumbledore and his powers.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“We need more people, Harry,” replied Hermione. “We can begin by talking to Morag, Theodore and Padma. They have been working with us for sometime, and they might be interested in joining more fully with us.”

“Can we trust Theodore?” questioned Daphne.

Harry and the muggleborns looked at her in puzzlement, as Daphne explained, “Lord Andronicus Nott was accused of being a Death Eater. He was acquitted owing to lack of evidence against him.”

“Do we want to trust a Death Eater's son?” asked Millicent.

“That might not matter,” sighed Sakarbal.

“What do you mean?” queried Hermione.

Rosier answered thoughtfully, “When the Dark Lord was broken, many were secretly happy that he was gone. We don't know how they will react to his potential return. So – we need to find out what they feel.”

“And how are we going to discover that?”

“A quiet chat with Narcissa would be in order,” murmured Rosier. “She can discover much. And she will be grateful for the information about the Dark Lord and the truth about the Stone, if you agree.” He

looked at Harry, and the latter nodded. Sakarbal suggested, "You might also want to tell McGonagall."

Harry bowed to his wisdom and Sakarbal added, "Harry, believe me, the Dark Lord's being in the school won't stay secret for long. People will find out. We don't know how Death Eaters will react to his near return."

"What d'you mean?" inquired Justin.

"In the worst case, it might galvanise the Death Eaters to his side," sighed Sakarbal tiredly. "The Dark Lord has not been seen for more than ten years. No one even knew positively that he was alive. But if they hear that he's actively trying to return, it might force them to show their hands. They might try to work for his return or might try to break away from the past. Or they might just keep their heads down and wait for more news. We'll need to find out what they're thinking."

Harry acquiesced, while Susan added, "For the moment, we'll need to watch each other's backs inside the school. I think we should always move about in groups. Last thing we want is 'accidents'" She looked at Hermione, "It's you I'm worried most about. There are two Slytherins, three 'Puffs, and two 'Claws. You're the only Gryffindor. I'd be happier if we had someone else from Gryffindor to keep you company."

Harry had jumped up as if stung. "By Jove! That may just be an answer to our problems!"

---(Author's Notes)---

(Did no one find the point where Quirrell just walks into Voldemort and becomes possessed suspicious? I mean – here is a person who is no Death Eater, nor presumably a Dark Side sympathiser who suddenly runs into Voldemort and lets him possess him! Anyone with an ounce of brains would know to avoid Voldemort like the plague and yet this wizard simply lets the Dark Lord take over his body. Naaah. There was more going on there than meets the eye.

Next chapter – we will resolve that question. In the meantime, try to guess what might have happened to poor stuttering professor Quirrell!

Full thanks to Voice of the Nephelim and Abstract Error for their help. Without their assistance, this chapter would never have been completed.)

## The Roaring Snake - 28

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. I am merely playing in the world created by JKR.

### End of the Year

Harry smiled coldly at his friends, "Let's think this carefully. If you were Dumbledore, what would you do now?"

That caught the attention of his friends, and he went on, "He will know what we've figured out by now. He knows that Voldemort talked to me, knows that I heard Voldemort being cut off decrying the Stone as a fake, knows that we'll have figured out his own role by now. If you were him, and you went to all this trouble to ensure that we went after Voldemort, it would imply that you'd continue to keep an close eye on us, right?"

They all nodded, and Harry continued, "We now also know about his spying attempts, and once we begin thwarting some of them at least - we don't know how many spying methods he's got at his disposal - he'll realise we know of his games. So - what will he do?"

Tony caught on to Harry's line of thought. "He'll try to find other ways to keep tabs on us."

"Absolutely," acquiesced Harry. "What are his options?"

Rosier leant back and murmured, "That's a rather large question. Hogwarts is his fiefdom. He's probably got more ways of knowing of things here without others knowing anything about it."

Harry shook his head, "You're overlooking something obvious. There are eight of us, already. There'll be more of us if Morag, Theodore, and Padma join. He'll be hard pressed to keep tabs on all of us at all times. More importantly, once he discovers we know of his meddling, he'll look for ever more means to spy. All those magical intelligence gathering systems are fine, but that'll also leave him a problem - he won't have any way of directly influencing our thoughts and our

actions, and we've already shown him that we work well as a group. So what's his solution?"

Justin speculated, "More attention towards us? Get more of his people to breathe down our necks?"

Harry remarked, "Possible, but who? He'll need someone who can actually influence us."

"McGonagall? Sprout? Flitwick? Hagrid?" questioned Rosier doubtfully.

"Possible again, but I'm not sure if McGonagall is easy to manipulate. Also, she struck me as one who'll do the right thing," commented Harry. "As for Sprout, Hagrid and Flitwick, they really don't know us much and I doubt they can do much to change what we feel. So they aren't going to be of much use to him that way."

Daphne replied slowly, weighing every word of hers scrupulously, "You think Dumbledore'll try to turn one or more of us? You think he'll bribe, persuade or coerce one of us into turning to his side?"

Harry nodded, "That's what I fear. We don't know what pressures and rewards he has at his disposal. So, I think a bit of our own gameplay's in order."

"We could try to pretend to go along with him ....," began Millicent, but Rosier shot it down, "Dumbledore's a master at this. If he as much as suspects his spy of double-crossing him, we'll be worse off than before."

"I agree," nodded Harry. "We can't lie to Dumbledore and get away with it. We need someone who'll genuinely spy on us."

At this, all his friends gazed at Harry in incomprehension, but the latter smiled, "Let the enemy provide. We were considering getting more people on our side. Let us also get into our group someone who we know to be Dumbledore's side. That way, Dumbledore will be less inclined to try to break us to work for him. He will act through his available agent!"

"Would he still not try to influence one of us?" inquired Daphne.

"It's unlikely," returned Harry. "Remember, if he got caught, it'd only make things harder for him. He'll rely on his minion to work his will on us."

"We can indulge in some disinformation ourselves," murmured Anthony.

Harry smiled back, "There's that too."

"You've got someone in mind, Harry?" asked Susan.

"A few options," remarked Harry. "Weasley, for one. MacMillan, for another. Longbottom's also a possibility."

"D'you think Dumbledore'll tell them that they're his weapons against us?" enquired Justin.

"Don't think so," returned Harry. "Dumbledore never tells anyone anything unless it's necessary, in my experience."

"So, he'll be another pawn, whoever it is?" inquired Hermione.

Harry nodded, and Hermione mused, "Harry, in that case, do we want to do it?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Look from their point of view, Harry. When they learn that they've been played by all sides, they'll be bitter and we'll make an enemy of them." She wrung her hands in unhappiness, "Besides, Harry, it's morally wrong - we'd be no better than Dumbledore if we did that."

Justin concurred, "Think also, Harry, what might happen to Dumbledore's pawn once Dumbledore realises he's been duped. They'll suffer for no fault of theirs."

Daphne returned, "The fate of Dumbledore's unfortunate minions is of no consequence to us."

"Peachy!" sneered Justin. "As long as you don't have to be the unfortunate one!"

Hermione pleaded once more with Harry, "We were unhappy about being manipulated by Dumbledore. Now we can't be thinking of manipulating others!"

"This is war, Hermione," replied Sakarbal gently. "Either we go down or our enemy goes down. And our foes are really powerful. We need every advantage we can get."

"We don't need to make more enemies than we possibly need to," answered Justin.

Harry frowned - he had thought his plan excellent, but Hermione and Justin had found a genuine flaw in it. He agreed with their view that it was unnecessary to make more enemies than necessary. But the idea was still worth pursuing if they had a proper pawn. Consequently, he did what all politicians do - he deferred the decision. He sighed, "There is much in what both of you say. We'll leave it for the moment, and keep the idea as a reserve - in case we need it desperately. But if we don't give him an opening, he'll try to turn one of us. How do we stop it?"

"Truth potions," replied Daphne promptly.

"Eh? How so?" queried Justin.

"Every week, we take truth potions and ask each other questions about our loyalties, whether we've spoken to Dumbledore and if so, when and about what. That should stop him from being overly manipulative."

Harry acquiesced, "That's a very good idea, Daphne. We'll do it. But is there anyone else we can approach to get on our side?"

"Maybe we should just keep our eyes open and grab anyone promising?" ventured Millicent.

"That seems like a good idea. Now, I'll go have a talk with McGonagall and see how we can approach Narcissa," muttered Harry. With that, the group returned to Hogwarts.

---(Scene Break)---

Harry's talk with Minerva was extremely illuminating. Harry had told her the entire truth about Voldemort, and his suspicions that the Stone there was a fake. The elderly transfiguration mistress was aghast. She stared in horror at the raven haired boy, incapable of coherent speech. Finally, she spluttered, "It – it is impossible. You-Know-Who here? Inside Hogwarts?!"

Harry said nothing, looking stolidly at the professor. "But how could he have deceived everyone?" breathed McGonagall.

"Perhaps he didn't," murmured Harry.

"What was that?"

"Perhaps Voldemort did not deceive everyone, ma'am. Think on it. There may be something in it."

McGonagall looked worriedly at Harry. "Do you know something, Harry?"

"I know nothing, professor. I have a few ideas, that is all. But I need a favour from you."

"What is it, Harry?"

Harry handed her a letter. "Can you hand this over to Lady Narcissa yourself, ma'am? I would rather not send it by owl."

Minerva saw that Harry knew a lot more than he was saying. However, she agreed to do his bidding. Harry thanked her and left.

---(Scene Break)---

Rosier proved to be a true prophet when it came to the voting among the Governors. The Governors meeting proved to be futile – Lucius and Avery stood neutral, while the Dumbledore loyalists stood solidly behind him. McGonagall told him later that they had discussed the matter, and had voted on an investigation – Regulus Black, Hamalcar Rosier, Amelia Bones and Andromache Wilkes had voted for the investigation by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but had been outvoted. Dumbledore loyalists had won the vote and the only investigation would be conducted by the headmaster himself. Harry was sure it would turn up nothing.

The next bit of assistance came from Narcissa a week later. She came to the school on some pretext and handed over a letter to Harry. She thanked him for the information about the Dark Lord, and the Stone. Further, she informed him that she would speak to him at the end of the term before he went back to his relatives.

---(Scene Break)---

Severus burst out angrily, “Headmaster, the situation is becoming impossible! The obnoxious brat already has half the first year eating out of his hands. Give him another year or two, and he will have the entire school following him!”

“I am aware of that, Severus,” murmured Dumbledore gently.

“Neither Draco, nor your proteges can do anything while Potter is around! They have no influence.”

Dumbledore pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, “What is the situation among the first year students, Severus?”

Snape leant back and answered, “The Gryffindors are mostly neutral, with the exception of the Granger girl. She is in his group, and he has a great deal of influence over her. The other Gryffindors dislike him because he fraternises with the Slytherins, but otherwise, they don’t mind him. Ravenclaws are getting on really good terms with him – Patil, Rosier, Goldstein and MacDougal are all very close friends with

him. The others are also swaying slowly to his side. The Hufflepuffs are also steadily warming to him. They seem to have forgiven him his refusal to play Quidditch for them. Bones and Finch-Fletchley are very close, but the others are not inimical to him in the least. And opinion among the Slytherins is split. Malfoy and his friends dislike him, but they don't really dare oppose him. The others are all at least decent to him. Greengrass, Nott and Bulstrode are already on his side, and Zabini and Davis are considering him carefully."

He continued almost as an afterthought. "In all this, headmaster, what surprises me is how Potter himself is being polite with everyone. He is not really forcing the pace. I wonder what he is up to."

"He is getting Amelia investigate Quirrell's movements last spring and summer," murmured Dumbledore. "He's also getting her to investigate our movements last spring and summer!"

Snape almost jumped at that, and only his supreme self-command suppressed this impulse. "What does he know?" whispered Snape. "And what is he planning?"

"I am not sure what he knows, Severus, nor what he is planning, apart from getting lessons in magic over summer. But he is very thorough. We must prepare for the worst." There was no need to ask how Dumbledore knew about this. The wily old warlock had his minions in every nook and cranny of the Ministry. Little of significance occurred without his knowledge.

Dumbledore was furiously considering the data provided by Severus. Of the ten people in Harry's group, the only real losses for him were the Granger girl, Patil and Finch-Fletchley. He could not allow Harry to obtain influence over Patil in particular. Two of them were muggleborn students and the third was from a Light family. He would have been able to mould them as he wished if it had not been for Harry. Goldstein and Bulstrode were borderline cases. Their families were independent of Dumbledore, and not exactly under his influence, but neither were they opponents of his. As for the others, they were really lost causes. Rosier, Greengrass and MacDougal were all children of families who had been thorns in Dumbledore's side for dozens of years. Nott was the son of a man who had been a Death

Eater. Dumbledore would rather that Nott was at Malfoy's side. And finally, Amelia Bones knew Dumbledore too well to let Susan fall under the old man's influence. No – there were no real losses yet, but it was only a question of time before Harry started making real dents in Dumbledore's base. He needed to act fast and act resolutely ....

There was a long silence between the two men, and then Dumbledore murmured, "There is a Persian proverb, Severus. Roughly translated, it means, 'Use your enemy's hand to catch a snake.' I think that is prudent advice."

"You are going to act against the boy?"

"In a way," remarked Dumbledore cryptically.

---(Scene Break)---

The next day, Dumbledore called McGonagall into his office the next morning. He waved his deputy into a seat and began "Minerva, there is an important matter I wish to discuss. Surely, Harry has told you about Voldemort being inside the school?"

If McGonagall was surprised, she did not show it. She merely stared at the headmaster, her face expressionless. Dumbledore continued, "Voldemort was possessing Quirrell, Minerva. How Quirrell was ensnared by him we don't know yet. It seems impossible, however, for Voldemort to have achieved it alone."

"What do you mean, Albus?"

"Think of it. Voldemort is a shade, incapable of any magic. He must have had assistance in possessing Quirrell. Who it is we don't know yet. Therefore, I think we need to take some precautions."

"What kind of precautions?"

"For one thing, he was obsessed with Harry. Surely you have observed how Quirrell was giving Harry extra lessons? He wants to get his claws on young Harry, I fear. We need to protect him. It is that I wished to discuss."

“If we need to protect him, shouldn't we have Pomona here with us?”

“Ahh – there lies the problem,” sighed the headmaster. “You see – Voldemort knew enough about Harry Potter that he allowed the child to follow him to the room where we held the Stone. It was sheer luck that I happened to be in time. Another minute, and Harry would have fallen to Tom, I fear. The boy needs careful supervision and most importantly, he trusts you. I have a proposition for you, if you will consider it.”

“What is it?”

“Harry is friends with a number of people in different houses. We both know how Tom strikes at people through their beloved ones, Minerva. Too many times have we seen it. Therefore, I am considering putting Harry and his friends in a separate group apart from the others. This way, we can protect him and his friends better.”

“I don't understand ...”

“At present, Minerva, Harry and his friends are spread all over the school. We both know that there are several children whose parents' sympathies lie with Voldemort. We cannot easily protect Harry and his friends now - particularly if they are going to be around people whose loyalties lie with Tom. I was hoping that we could put them in a separate group outside the four Houses and you could oversee that group.”

“Albus, I already have my responsibilities as the deputy and Head of Gryffindor,” objected Minerva.

“Consider, Minerva. Harry Potter is wary to the last degree. He scarcely trusts anyone. But you he trusts. Therefore, it would make him feel more comfortable as well if you were his supervisor. As for your responsibilities as head of Gryffindor, Septima Vector could take them over. We need Harry Potter safe, and you are the only one I trust to do it.”

Minerva thought over the proposal carefully. Dumbledore was hiding something – of that she was certain. He had not addressed the issue of the Stone at all, and she clearly knew that he had been less than frank about it. Dumbledore was playing his own game and she needed to watch out for Harry. But she agreed with him about one thing – Harry's safety was paramount, and if he felt more comfortable under her supervision, she would do everything she could to help him. She nodded slowly, "Alright. How should we go about it?"

Dumbledore answered, "I have thought about it, Minerva. We remove the students from the Houses, and put them in a separate group. Essentially, it will be their House." He handed her a parchment, "This will be their timetable. They will have their own Common Room, sleeping quarters, and a place to eat. They will be housed in the West Wing, where we have several rooms free."

Minerva looked curiously at that, "You plan on isolating them from the school so thoroughly?"

"No other students have been attacked half as many times in twice as many years. It is for their safety. We would rather have Harry and his friends kept away from potential hazards, than have them dead or wounded."

Minerva sighed in resignation, "How long is the arrangement to last?"

"That is hard to say. It will last for the next three weeks, which will bring us to the end of this academic year. Next year – we shall see."

"Whom are we removing apart from Harry Potter?"

"Ms. Granger from Gryffindor, Mr. Goldstein, Ms. MacDougal and Mr. Rosier from Ravenclaw, Mr. Finch-Fletchley and Ms. Bones from Hufflepuff, Ms. Bulstrode, and Ms. Greengrass from Slytherin."

Minerva rose to her feet. "Very well, Albus. I shall meet those students and inform them of the new arrangement."

---(Scene Break)---

The next few weeks passed quickly. Harry and his friends, cut off from the rest of the school except for classes where everyone was becoming increasingly edgy, were busy preparing for their exams. Now with no distractions, they all pushed themselves and each other to the limit and beyond. Their collective efforts paid off and they were all certain that they had done well in the exams.

It was late afternoon on the last day in school, and the students were all lying lazily about in the sun near the lake. Harry and his friends strode outside nonchalantly, in pairs. Glancing around edgily to make sure no one was paying them any attention, the group silently and surreptitiously made their way to their meeting spot in the Forest.

Once they were arrived there, they all dropped down comfortably on the grass. Harry smiled down at all of them, and spoke, "Okay, people, now that we're finally done with the schoolwork for the year, maybe we can get to the what we should be doing in summer. But first, we should discuss our research and news. Sak, Tony?"

"There are three definite ways he has of spying on us, Harry. More perhaps, but we are sure of these three," answered Goldstein, ruffling through his notes. "First, the house elves. They are everywhere, never seen and they pick up every bit of news more than the others. Since Dumbledore is the headmaster, they are bound to obey him and they are his eyes and ears everywhere."

Sakarbal took up the story, "The second bit is the portraits. You'll notice that most portraits here are not of famous wizards or witches. With the exception of former headmasters and headmistresses, they are random wizards - often fictional - and completely unrelated to the wizarding world. Most of these portraits were commissioned by Dumbledore and installed by him on his becoming headmaster to ensure that those portraits snoop for him. Portraits of famous wizards and witches, particularly those of other families would retain loyalties to their own flesh and blood. Dumbledore had them all removed. Now these portraits are a vital component of his intelligence system."

Sakarbal added, "Finally, we have the prefects. In Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, all the prefects are Dumbledore loyalists.

There are likely other means he has, but these are the ones we could find."

Harry nodded, as if he had expected that. He turned to Daphne and Morag, "Did you check up on possession?"

Daphne spoke, "We checked all references we could, and asked our parents as well. Your suspicions were correct, Harry. No one can be possessed against their will. Quirrell had to be willing to let the Dark Lord's soul share his body."

Harry nodded, and gestured to Susan Bones.

The red-haired girl returned, "Auntie looked into your questions. Quirrell has no criminal record, nor had he any sympathies for You-Know-Who's supporters. He was in Hogwarts during the last war, and he has no family that we know of. He was quite outspoken against the Dark side, which was why his appointment as Defence teacher was approved."

Susan continued, "As for what he was doing, Quirrell had been teaching Muggle Studies for five years before that, and he got a year off. He spent much of the time in Africa with a prince there. This has been verified - the prince is an old friend of Quirrell and Quirrell helped his friend with some magical problems with his castle. He seemed completely normal then and the friend is certain that there was nothing wrong with him. The curious bit is this. Apparently, Quirrell was scheduled to stay with the prince for all of the summer as well. However, on the 29th of June last year, he got a visitor - name unknown - and Quirrell left the prince telling him that he needed to return to Britain for personal reasons. But this is the curious bit. He didn't return to Britain for nearly four weeks after that. Instead, he went to Austria. There, he disappeared for a couple of weeks in Austria. Then he travelled for another couple of weeks in the Balkans and then returned to Britain on the 30th of July. In fact, he had been back in Britain just the day before we met him in Diagon Alley. He had corresponded with Dumbledore, who shifted him to Defence after Prof. Barnes resigned."

Harry and his friends digested all this quietly. Harry questioned, "Who was the person who met him?"

"We don't know, Harry. Nor do we know why he really left. No one there knows anything about his visitor. Auntie also checked the International portkey terminal - no British wizard had visited the country in several weeks before that."

"Where were the Hogwarts faculty at this time?"

"With the exception of Snape, all were in Hogwarts. Snape was in a conference in Zurich."

"Was he really there?"

"Yes, the conference organisers have been interviewed and they can vouch that he was certainly there."

"You see the thrust of my questions. Quirrell was not a supporter of Voldemort. It is most unlikely that he would meet Voldemort and simply let him share his body. It is even less likely that Voldemort would dare approach Quirrell directly - after all, Voldemort has been spending his time hiding from all wizards. Consequently, Voldemort had to have positive information that Quirrell would be an ally, or he would never have dared approach. I think someone made sure that Quirrell would host Voldemort."

This was a horrifying possibility to swallow. But Harry's logic held together, as the raven haired boy explained, "Let us take this question piecemeal. Let us for the moment leave out the question of how they made sure that Quirrell would host Voldemort. Let's take the other question - how much did Dumbledore know about this?"

"Dumbledore arranged for the Stone to be brought to Hogwarts and set up those ridiculous protections around it. I think we are agreed that those protections were meant to be breached, and that we were meant to go after Quirrell."

Hermione objected, "Harry, he might have meant for the protections to be breached, but nothing proves that he knew about Quirrell."

"The probability is strongly against your suggestion, Hermione. We know that Dumbledore had brought the Stone out of Gringotts. Now, how did he know that anyone was after it? It is too much of a coincidence to suppose that he would plan all the protections, if he had no idea that anyone was after it. Secondly, if no one was after the Stone, how would he encourage us to go after it? After all, none of us have a taste for theft. He set up the entire business knowing that Quirrell would go after the Stone, and we would be forced to stop him."

"Also, remember Quirrell had come back to Britain only one day before the attempt on the Stone. Dumbledore had not met Quirrell after he returned to Britain. Is it a coincidence that Dumbledore got the Stone retrieved on the very next day of Quirrell's arrival? It is too much to imagine that he had the Stone saved in the nick of the time and set up those protections to defend against a threat he did not exist."

Harry continued, "But if he knew about Quirrell, it stands to reason that he foresaw what would happen. Dumbledore had begun his preparations for the Stone much before Quirrell returned to Hogwarts. So I am inclined to believe that he knew of Quirrell's meeting Voldemort and becoming possessed."

"But why would he hire a man who was possessed by the Dark Lord?" queried Daphne.

"To make sure that we came face to face with Voldemort," replied Harry softly. "In fact, I think Quirrell was chosen to host Voldemort precisely because he had no family. Quirrell stood the least chance of being detected by others that he was being possessed by Voldemort."

"But how did anyone ensure that Quirrell would go looking for Voldemort?" burst out Justin.

"Those two weeks he disappeared in Austria did something to him, I fear. We know of no 'personal reasons' why he might have gone to Austria. In fact, we know of no family of his, in Austria or anywhere

else. He was, I fear, lured to Austria and made to go looking for Voldemort. What was done to him, we shall probably never know. But something was done to him that he went looking for Voldemort in the precise place where Voldemort was hiding. How did Quirrell know where to go looking for Voldemort? He was no supporter of Voldemort, nor was he of any particular interest to him." there was absolute silence as Harry continued, "The answer is - because he was given that information and sent looking for Voldemort. He was just another victim of the games being played."

There was silence at Harry's conclusion. Hermione broke out, "This is just speculation, Harry. There are other possible theories that would cover the facts."

"Indeed, there are, Hermione. But it would involve one too many coincidences. I am almost certain that I am right."

The eerie pause stretched for a long moment. Rosier broke out, "Be that as it may, Harry, tomorrow my parents, Daphne's parents and Narcissa will meet with us in King's Cross. We need to arrange for you to come to the classes over summer. We begin in two weeks. All preparations have been made."

Harry nodded, "Thank your parents and Lady Narcissa, will you?"

"What do you make of this putting us in a separate House?" queried Millie.

"It is clear to me that Dumbledore wanted it. Why, we don't know yet, but McGonagall confirmed to me that it was Dumbledore's idea. So we'll need to be doubly careful."

They all rose, and Harry faced them, "Attention, ladies and gentlemen, for if my reconstruction is correct, from this moment, we are at war with Dumbledore."

---(Author's Notes)---

And so we come to the end of the first year. I am writing the sequels and am not sure whether to put them in the same story or begin a

different one. On balance, I incline to the latter. It would be better to finish one story and put it away before beginning another, even if the second is a continuation of the first.

By the way, I hope I have cleared out the major threads in the story. Some are going to continue to the next one, so they will remain unresolved. If anyone wants to ask about any particular point, please feel free to do so. I don't wish to leave loose ends lying about.

As usual, my thanks to Abstract Error and Voice of the Nephelim for their cooperation in beta-reading the story. Thanks, both of you. Your help is precious and without it, I doubt the story would have been completed.